

AN HISTORICAL EXAMINATION OF CHIEFLY BREASTPLATES Chest ornaments and status in Fiji (South Pacific)

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ABSTRACT. Composite breastplates formerly worn by paramount chiefs in Fiji (South Pacific) are key artefacts in understanding Fiji's pre-Christian society. This article discusses the evolution of chiefly breastplates, originally made of shell and later fashioned out of other materials, including sperm-whale ivory. Through historical comparisons, this article explores possible equivalencies and complementarities between the various materials used in breastplates and discusses possible reasons for changing traditions in the materiality of chiefly body adornment in Fiji.

INTRODUCTION

Not uncommon in museum collections gathered in Fiji (South Pacific) during the British Protectorate (1874–1970), composite breastplates made of pearl shell and sperm-whale ivory have become somewhat emblematic of Fiji's early material culture. However, their unique role in the embodiment of paramount chiefly authority, their material evolution and connection with other art forms in the region (Fig. 1) and their significance for understanding Fiji's historical value systems have been little discussed. This is especially true in comparison to the extensive literature that exists on other artefacts, such as *tabua*,¹ or ceremonial sperm-whale teeth.²

In this article, I combine data from museum collections, historical literature, archives and fieldwork to discuss the key features of these breastplates, as observed in Fiji since the late eighteenth century and subsequently collected in museums in Europe, the USA and Pacific.³ By sequencing different stages in the evolution of Fijian chest ornaments, my aim is to provide a closer understanding of change in the cultural values historically attributed to materials such as pearl shell and sperm-whale ivory. Importantly, I highlight the fact that early breastplates, as well as other relevant artefacts, were made of shell before being reproduced or framed in ivory. I argue that the supreme cultural value currently attributed to sperm-whale teeth in Fiji (e.g. Ewins 2009, Hooper 2013) has obscured the significance of other materials that were formerly also regarded as markers of chiefly status. Historical sources allow this trend to be re-evaluated. By

¹ Unless otherwise indicated, all foreign terms in this article are in Standard Fijian (Bau dialect).

² For recent examples, see Arno (2005), Clunie (2013), Ewins (2013), Hooper (2013).

³ Since 2006, I have examined early Fijian collections in dozens of museums, primarily located in France, Fiji, the UK, Australia, Aotearoa/New Zealand and on the east coast of the USA. Between 2010 and 2017, I also travelled several times to central (Suva and Ovalau) and northern (Taveuni) Fiji to conduct fieldwork, amounting to ten months in total.

ber of material variations can be identified, depending on when artefacts were made and, possibly, their provenance.⁴

The first breastplates ever observed in Fiji were made of large pearl shells (also called 'civa'). The British navigator William Bligh reported them from near Moce Island, in eastern Fiji, in 1792 (Lee 1920:143–144). Twenty-eight years later, one such breastplate found its way to a museum for the first time. This item is now kept at the University Museum of Kazan in Russia and is made of a unique polished *civa* shell (Barratt 1990:153). It was collected on Ono-i-Lau Island (southeast Fiji), where the Russian navigator Bellingshausen and his crew stopped briefly in 1820 and where the association between shell breastplates and chiefs first became evident.⁵ Sailors noticed that only certain individuals, including members of the ruling family, wore them (Barratt 1990:103), and named local chiefs were depicted wearing *civa* pendants (Debenham 1945:308, pl. XXXI).

In following years, travellers such as New England traders in sandalwood and bêche-de-mer (Leclerc-Caffarel 2013:119) and explorers like Jules S.C. Dumont d'Urville (France) and Charles Wilkes (USA) repeatedly referred to chest ornaments made of oyster shell.⁶ They also actively collected them for museums. In 1838 Dumont d'Urville or another member of his crew acquired a breastplate made of whalebone (Leclerc-Caffarel 2013:122), currently kept at the Musée du Quai Branly Jacques Chirac in Paris (#71.1954.20.178D).

In 1840, Lieutenant William Reynolds, a member of the US Exploring Expedition under Captain Wilkes, suggested that breastplates made only of shell had become less valued. 'Some [Fijian islanders] had [...] breast ornaments of mother-of-pearl, but to which they did not attach much value,' he wrote (Hoffman Cleaver and Stann 1998:160–161). Interestingly, at around the same time, one finds the first descriptions of composite breastplates made of pearl shell and whale ivory. These early accounts suggest a close association between such pectorals and paramount chiefs in northern and central Fiji. The best known example of this is probably the chest ornament worn by Chief Tanoa Visawaqa,⁷ described as follows in 1840: '[...] on his breast, hanging from his neck, he

⁴ The widespread circulation of both artefacts and raw materials in Fiji and beyond complicates the identification of precise provenances.

⁵ Between 1819 and 1821, Fabian Gottlieb Thaddeus von Bellingshausen led the sloops *Vostok* and *Mirny* around the south polar continent and explored Antarctica and Oceania.

⁶ French navigator Jules Sébastien César Dumont d'Urville led two exploratory voyages to the Pacific, the first between 1826 and 1829 on the *Astrolabe*, the second between 1837 and 1840 on the *Astrolabe* and another corvette, the *Zélée*, spending time in Fiji on both occasions. Charles Wilkes commanded the US Exploring Expedition (1838–1842), which travelled around the world. In 1840, the five ships of the expedition spent almost three months surveying the Fijian archipelago.

⁷ From 1829 to 1852 Tanoa Visawaqa was the ruling chief (*vunivalu*) of the chiefdom of Bau. The *vunivalu's* influence, however, largely extended beyond the island of Bau (off the east coast of Viti Levu), being paramount in Central and Eastern Fiji as well as during most of the nineteenth century. Tanoa was the father of Cakobau, an influential chief known to have ceded Fiji's sovereignty to the British crown.



TANO A, KING OF BAU.

Figure 2: “Tanoa, King of Bau”, sketched by US Exploring Expedition’s artist Alfred T. Agate in 1840 (Wilkes 1845:58)

wore an ornament made of mother-of-pearl, tortoise-shell, and ivory, not very neatly put together,⁸ and as large as a dinner-plate (called *diva ndina* [*civa dina* or true *civa*]) [...]’ (Wilkes 1845:58). In the US Exploring Expedition’s report (Wilkes 1845), the above description is accompanied by a drawing of Tanoa by Alfred T. Agate (Fig. 2), which allowed Fergus Clunie, former director of the Fiji Museum, to identify Tanoa’s breastplate among the collection of the Cambridge University Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (CUMAA), where it is still held (#Z-2730).⁹

Shortly after Wilkes, a Methodist missionary, Thomas Williams, also reported seeing a composite breastplate worn by a high-ranking chief. On 27 December 1842 Williams wrote in his journal: ‘Accompanied by Bro. Lyth I visited the old King, Tuithakau¹⁰ [...] I found the old man seated in a kind of half Windsor chair [...] His large whale’s-tooth mounted breastplate hung round his neck’ (Williams 1931:138–139). Two years later, in a letter to his father, Williams similarly noted, *à propos* Tui Cakau: ‘A ceva (breastplate) inlaid with, and surrounded by whales’ teeth on his breast; an ear-piece and armlets are his principal ornaments’ (Williams 1931:186, note 66).

However, composite breastplates from Fiji did not reach museum collections until the establishment of British Protectorate. Among the first to be given away, Tanoa’s breastplate was offered to Sir Arthur Gordon in 1875, who received it from Cakobau, Tanoa’s son and a powerful chief in his own right. Gordon was the first British governor of Fiji, and the gift of Tanoa’s breastplate has been interpreted as a seminal gesture of allegiance from Cakobau to the highest representative of the Queen of England in Fiji at that time (Herle and Carreau 2013:4).

The previous examples highlight an important characteristic of breastplates in Fiji: their limited alienability, or limited ability to be traded away. While most valuables in Fiji (*iyau*) are meant precisely to be exchanged (Thomas 1991:67–68), the circulation of *civa* breastplates was restricted. In the early nineteenth century, breastplates were closely associated with named high-ranking individuals. According to the New England trader Warren Osborn (1833), they were kept within ruling families and transmitted from father to son across several generations. Very few items in Fiji have this pattern of exchange. Among them are items that Steven Hooper calls ‘heirloom *tabua*’ (2013:141–145), whale’s teeth that are considered to be extremely powerful and are closely associated with pre-Christian deities. Interestingly, at least one these heirloom *tabua* is a composite object, being made of several pieces of ivory assembled in the shape of a large whale’s tooth (CUMAA #1936.380). The lashing technique used on this item is similar to that employed on the composite breastplates described below.¹¹ – The uses of those

⁸ Hooper (2013) suggested a possible mistake in transcription here, for this breastplate is actually skillfully stitched together.

⁹ See Clunie (1983).

¹⁰ To this day, the individual bearing the title ‘Tui Cakau’ is regarded as the paramount chief of northern Fiji. His headquarters are located in the village of Somosomo, on Taveuni Island.

¹¹ See Hooper (2006, 2013, 2016) and Roth (1937).

described above, namely as the personal ornaments of the most influential chiefs in Fiji, family heirlooms and prestigious gifts,¹² along with material connections to some of the most powerful items ever described in Fiji, highlight the need for examples of such artefacts that are now in museums to be examined more closely.

A CLOSER LOOK AT COMPOSITE BREASTPLATES IN MUSEUMS

In museum collections attributed to Fiji, there are in fact two kinds of composite breastplates:

- *civavonovono*: pearl shell (*civa*), framed and inlaid with sperm-whale ivory (*tabua*), reflecting the meaning of ‘civavonovono’ as ‘inlaid (*vonovono*) pearl shell (*civa*)’
- *civatabua*: *civa* made of ivory (*tabua*), i.e. an assemblage of pieces of sperm-whale teeth in the shape of a pearl shell (Figs. 3–4)

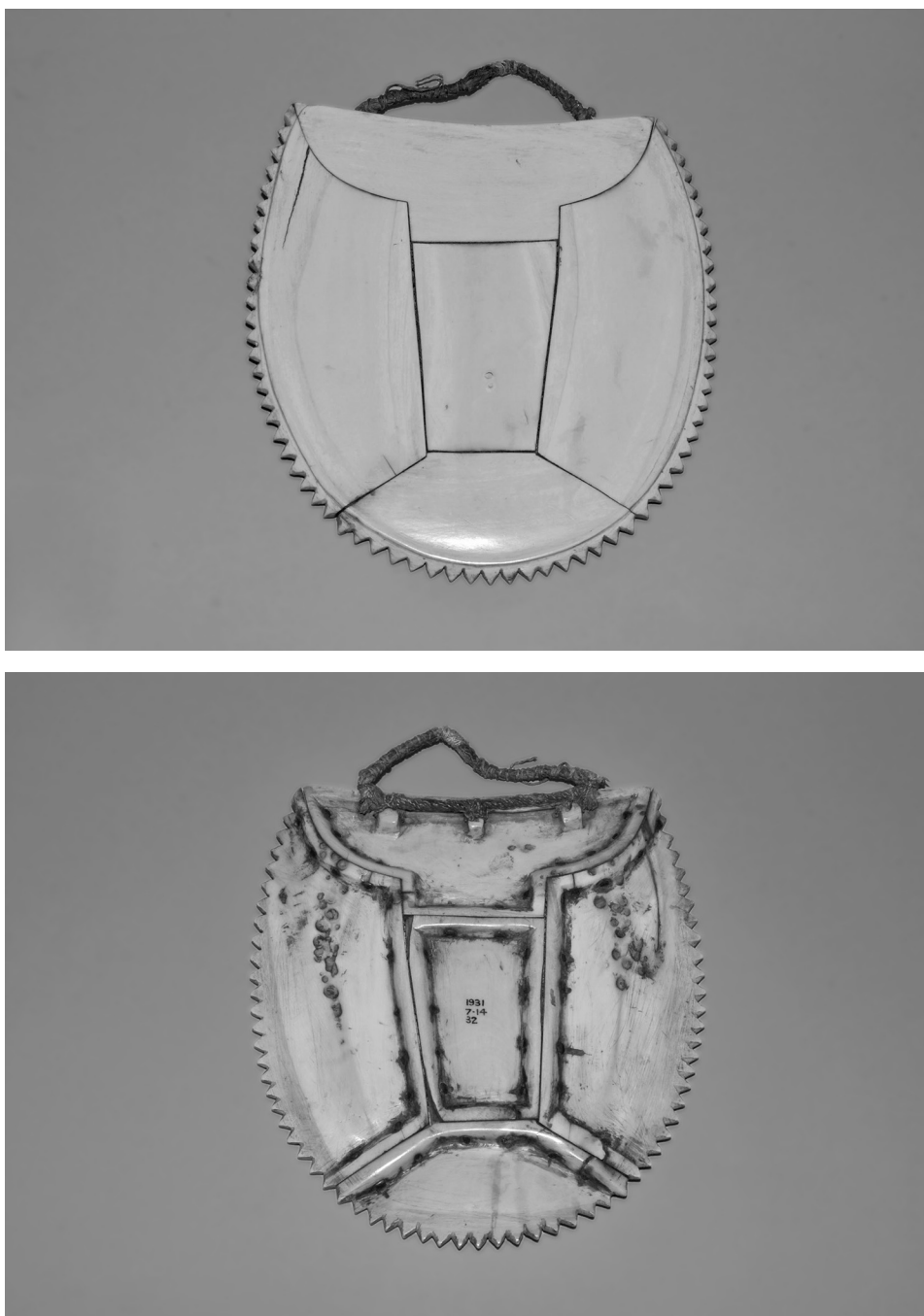
Technical resemblances and differences between those two types, as well as stylistic variations within each of them, allow a discussion of the material evolution of the breastplates collected in Fiji during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. On most examples that appear particularly early, the different pieces are lashed together by means of tiny strings of vegetable fibres, which go through converging holes carved into the ivory or shell. Sometimes, these perforations are drilled into special linking parts, left in relief on the back of ivory pieces (Fig. 4). In other cases they are carved directly into thin pieces of ivory and mother-of-pearl (Figs. 5–6).

On most early examples, the lashing is barely visible from the front, where the sideways perforations do not show. Where necessary, the carver placed tiny plugs of ivory on both sides of the breastplate to conceal the holes (Fig. 7). On some *civatabua* specimens, assemblage techniques remind some of the planking methods used by specialist craftsmen from Tonga and Samoa who travelled to Fiji to build large sea-going canoes out of Fijian timber (Figs. 8–9).¹³ This feature suggests that *civatabua* may have originated in Tonga, a neighbouring archipelago with a long history of importing ivory and artefacts made of ivory into Fiji (e.g. Mariner 1818:321). In Tonga too, Fijian elders wore ivory pectorals as ‘badges of honour’ (von Hügel 1990:145).

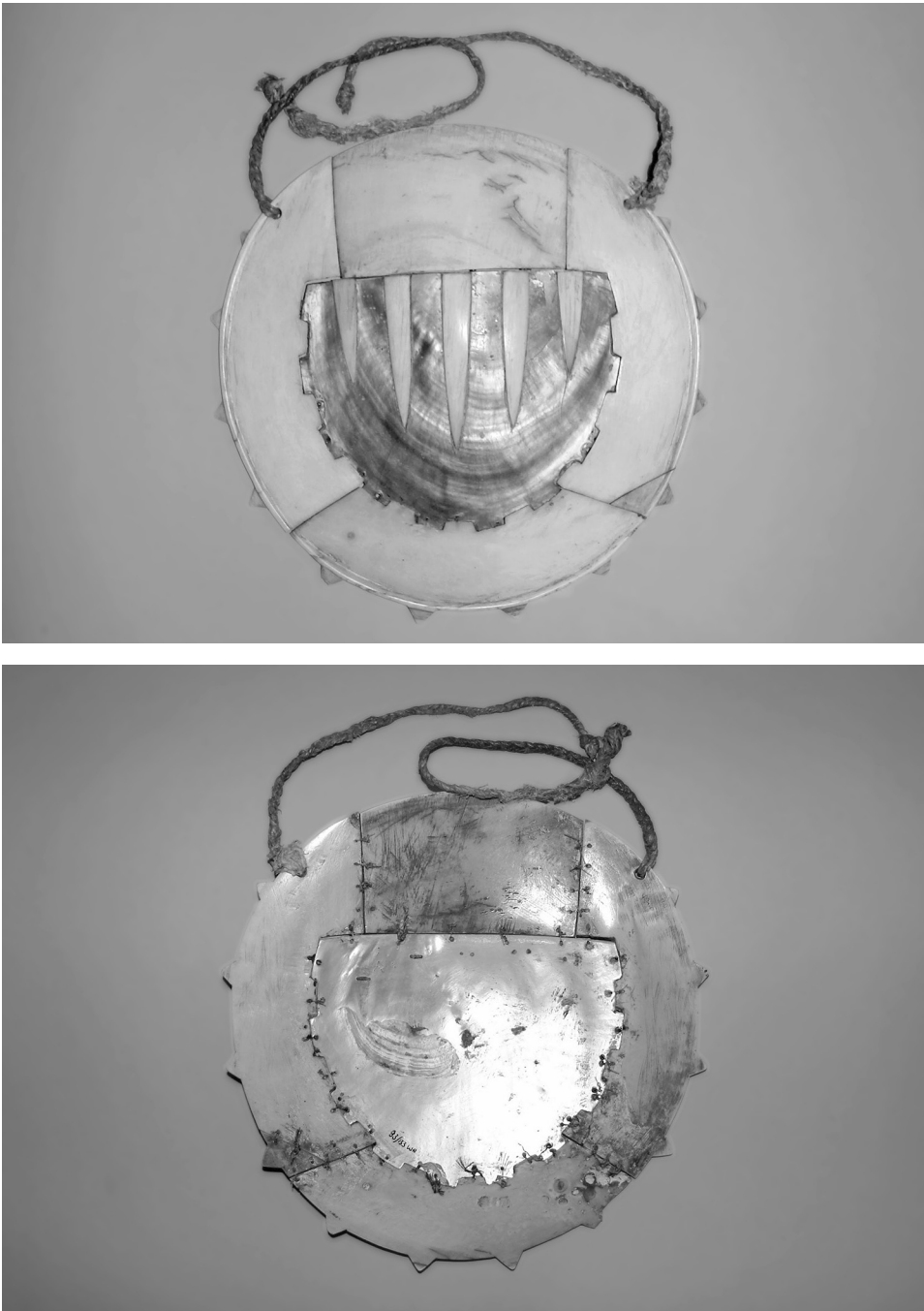
Techniques of manufacture consistent with stone-tool use (see Richards 2006:72) suggest that *civatabua* preceded *civavonovono*, but *civatabua* remain difficult to date. Formally they can be compared to breastplates made of whalebone, which are common in early museum collections from Fiji. Whalebone pectorals in Fijian collections are

¹² The term ‘gift’ is used here with reference to the work of Marcel Mauss (1966) and others (e.g. Godelier 2004), that is, as a specific category of non-monetary exchange.

¹³ See also Hooper (2016:124–125).



Figures 3–4: *Civatabua*. British Museum (Oc1931.0714.32), recto (3), verso (4) (all photos, except Fig. 8: S.L.C.)



Figures 5–6: *Civavonovono*. Fiji Museum (83.133WR), recto (5), verso (6)

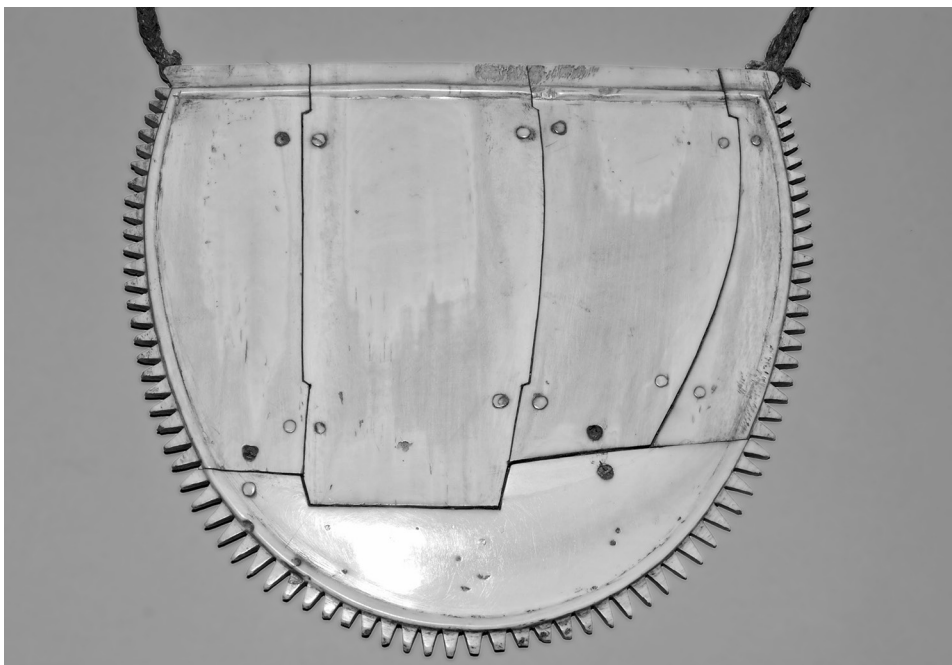


Figure 7: *Civatabua*. British Museum (Oc+2395)>

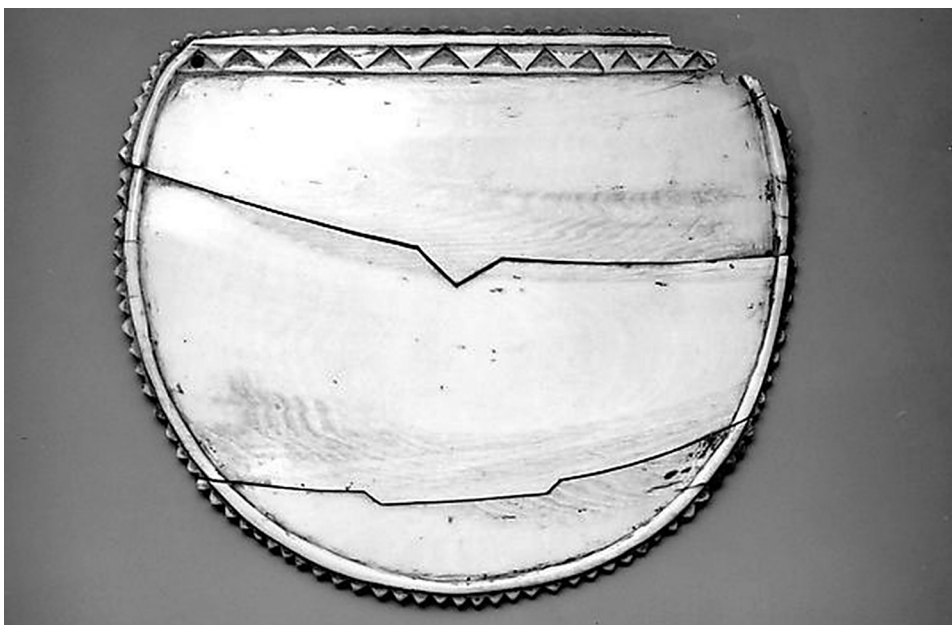


Figure 8: *Civatabua*. The Metropolitan Museum (1978.412.747), recto (photo: The Metropolitan Museum)

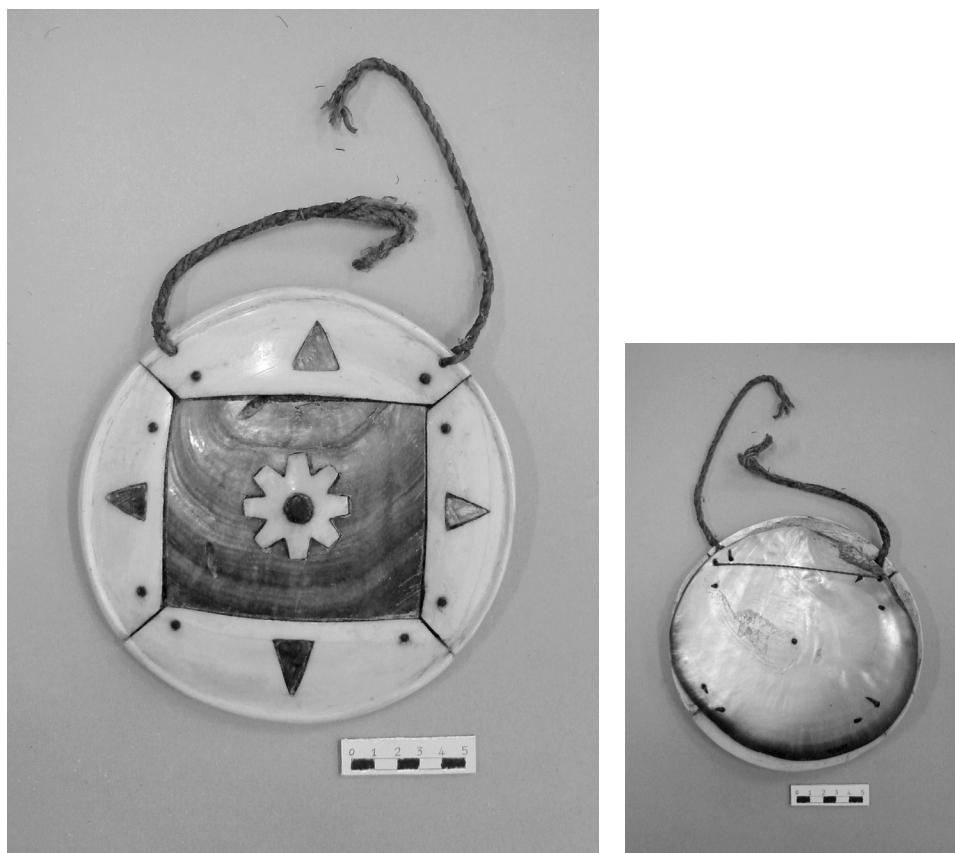


Figure 9: *Civatabua*. The Metropolitan Museum (1978.412.747), verso

approximately twenty centimetres in diameter, about the same as other breastplates, though they might be related to the first breastplates mentioned in the area (Clunie 2013:167). During stopovers in Tonga in the 1770s, the British navigator James Cook and his men described and acquired massive plates of whalebone.¹⁴ Some were large enough to cover the chests of Tongan kings and were described as shields for protection against projectiles (Clunie 1986:87–88, Hooper 2016:122–123). It is possible that Tongan craftsmen, who were experts in the working of whalebone, made smaller breastplates for adornment and traded them with Fijian partners. Small pectorals in whalebone are rare in collections made in Tonga (Kaepler 2009:205). In any case, whalebone breastplates from Fiji reached museum collections as early as the 1830s (see above), approximately four decades before ivory pectorals.

Civavonovono and *civatabua* co-existed in Fiji, the former, being made of shell and ivory, mostly if not only being found in Fiji. Like other composite breastplates, however,

¹⁴ James Cook led three major voyages of exploration around the world, including to the Pacific, in 1768–1771, 1772–1775 and 1776–1779.



Figures 10–11: *Civavonovono*. Fiji Museum (82.1215T), recto (10), verso (11)

they were probably made by Tongan craftsmen,¹⁵ though the inlaying of pearl shell seems specific to Fiji.¹⁶

Civavonovono show obvious technical evolutions and are therefore easier to date than *civatabua*. Older specimens are made from one polished oyster shell cut to a desired shape and carefully framed with matching pieces of whale ivory, the different pieces being secured together by means of vegetable fibres (Figs. 5–6) or nails in the case of more recent specimens. These riveted breastplates were made from the middle of

¹⁵ The specialized canoe builders from Tonga (Tongan: *tufunga fo'u vaka*) mentioned above, who frequently travelled to Fiji to build large sea-going canoes, included hereditary patrilineages of experts in ivory work (Tongan: *tufunga fono lei*). These professional ivory workers produced and circulated important items made of whale ivory, including inlaid war clubs and breastplates.

¹⁶ The Tongan word for these artefacts is 'sifafatafata' (Mills 2009:12–13).

the nineteenth century and include some fine specimens (Figs. 10–11). On these, however, the polished shell is often kept uncut, with carved ivory parts nailed onto it. Early specimens, originally mended by means of fibres, might also be repaired with nails. One example is a specimen at the Fiji Museum (#81.583) on which a long rectangular piece of ivory is now secured with rivets, the rest of the assemblage being lashed together. However, the majority of breastplates made with iron nails are of poorer quality, the ivory framework often being thick, and the different pieces do not always match each other well. Above all, the quality of surface inlays is inferior. Often on nailed breastplates, unlike sewn *civavonovono*, inlays are not symmetric but inserted into roughly carved-out spaces without the precision shown on finer models. These coarser ornaments seem to have been produced *en masse* from the 1850s onwards. There are a number of them in twentieth-century museum collections.

In spite of variations in their manufacture, the number of *civavonovono* produced and used in Fiji during the nineteenth century and the first part of the twentieth reflects the high demand for these breastplates. Given the considerable increase in the amount of whale ivory in circulation during the nineteenth century due to exchanges with Euro-American voyagers, one may wonder why *civavonovono* rather than *civatabua* became increasingly popular, especially as body ornaments for extremely powerful chiefs such as the Vunivalu of Bau and Tui Cakau. It is possible that the *civavonovono* were the low-cost option, being partially made of shell rather than ivory. However, I argue that the main reason lies elsewhere, namely in the unrivalled value attributed to *civa* shells.

HISTORICAL EVIDENCES OF CIVA SIGNIFICANCE

Today, *tabua* or whale's teeth, which are well discussed in the literature, are considered superior to all other valuables in Fiji,¹⁷ having long been valued both there and on neighbouring islands.¹⁸ Yet, this does not mean that *tabua* were always made only of whale ivory in the past, nor that whale's teeth were originally considered superior to all other materials. At the beginning of the nineteenth century, European sailors noticed that whale's teeth were in high demand in Fiji. Traders could obtain almost anything in exchange for a whale's tooth, including large cargoes of sandalwood (e.g. Im Thurn and Wharton 1925:63–66). As a consequence, Euro-American visitors imported massive amounts of whale's teeth and other kinds of ivory into Fiji to purchase *bêche-de-mer*, sandalwood and other valuable trade items. By 1850 the quantity of whale ivory in circulation in Fiji had increased dramatically, and a greater number of ivory artefacts were being produced.¹⁹

¹⁷ See, e.g., Hooper (1982, 2013), Arno (2005), Ewins (2013).

¹⁸ See, for example, Mariner (1818).

¹⁹ See Hooper (2013, 2016).

In the past Fijians relied on stranded whales and local exchanges to obtain ivory, and in much smaller quantities. At the same time, oral traditions mention powerful *tabua* made of stone (e.g. Brewster 1937:43–49) and other materials depending on place and time.²⁰ Early voyagers also reported shells, including *civa* shells, being used in the same way as whale's teeth today. For example, Peter Bays, a sailor wrecked in eastern Fiji in 1829, described how a local chief used a 'pearl shell' to mediate the return of naval instruments taken from the castaways by villagers:

[W]hen we made the king sensible, by signs, that they had taken away our chronometer, [...] he showed his supreme authority, and calling one of the natives, desired him to bring a plantain leaf, on which he laid [...] a beautiful large pearl shell four or five inches in diameter; the man went away with it, and in four or five minutes produced [the stolen instruments] to us (Bays 1831:64).

In another instance, in 1842, missionary Thomas Jaggar reported that Rokotui Dreketi (the paramount chief of Rewa, in southeastern Viti Levu) offered a *civa* shell to a local divinity he thought he had angered, as ritual apology (*soro*) made in an attempt to save his son's life (1988:101). These examples indicate the high value and supernatural efficacy historically attributed to *civa* shells in Fiji. This significance of pearl shell is obvious in the breastplates themselves. Regardless of the materials from which they are made, as already noted, breastplates, like large pearl oysters, are called 'civa'. They also systematically retain the shape and approximate dimensions of pearl shells. Thus, whether made of ivory (*civatabua*), inlaid with ivory (*civavonovono*) or made of another material such as whalebone, all breastplates in Fiji are classified as 'civa', 'tabua' (ivory) being a qualifying term here. Furthermore, the first breastplates observed in Fiji were only made of pearl shell,²¹ which, despite considerable material evolution, remained literally central to *civavonovono*. Indeed, it seems that the pearl shell in Tanoa Visawaqa's breastplate (Fig. 2) pre-dates its ivory frame. In the early 1830s the American trader Warren Osborn described Tanoa's chest ornament as follows, possibly at an earlier stage in its manufacture:

Pearl shells with the cross taken from their back, are worn by them [Fijians], some of these they consider very valuable, as they have been handed down from father to son for many generations. Old Snuff [Tanoa] has one which has been handed down in this way, it is broken and lashed together in many places, he always wears it upon his neck and takes great care of it (Osborn 1833).

Osborn is usually a keen observer. It seems unlikely that he would have omitted to describe the ivory frame of the pectoral if it had already existed. Besides, the shell of Tanoa's breastplate is indeed broken and has been mended in several places. It even

²⁰ See Brewster (1937:40), Deane (1921:77–78), Hooper (2013:146–147), Roth and Milner (1973:97–99).

²¹ See above and Lee (1920), Dumont d'Urville (1830–35), Barratt (1990).

includes a piece of turtle shell in one top corner. Given the significance of turtles in Fijian culture, this might be regarded as an early and powerful repair. An alternative suggestion, therefore, is that the original and most powerful part of Tanoa's chest ornament was the shell.

EQUIVALENCES AND COMPLEMENTARITY BETWEEN PEARL SHELL AND IVORY

Across the Pacific pearl shells were frequently used as body ornaments. In Polynesia they were regarded as markers of rank and used to forge connections with the world of the dead and of powerful transcendent beings referred to as 'gods' by early voyagers and missionaries. In Western Polynesia pearl shells evoked the sea, as well as the sky and celestial bodies that were central to cosmogonic myths (Clunie 2013:167). In other parts of the Pacific, pearl shells were replicated in other materials too. For example, in Aotearoa/New Zealand, breastplates in the shape of oysters were made of stone, including greenstone (Maori: *pounamu*). *Pounamu* is a material of paramount importance in Maori culture, perceived as capable of enshrining the *mana* of chiefs and supernatural entities, like whale ivory in Fiji. Early Polynesian settlers in New Zealand might have carried pearl-shell ornaments to 'the island of the long white cloud', but in contrast to stone specimens prehistoric items made of shell did not survive. Large oyster shells rarely being found on the shores of New Zealand, it is possible that its early inhabitants perpetuated the tradition for some time using stone instead. One such greenstone pectoral is currently kept at the Auckland Museum (#3417), along with other 'stone discs'.

These examples help frame a few hypotheses regarding material changes in chiefly breastplates from Fiji. First, it is possible that material transformations were prompted by a wish to build stronger, longer lasting artefacts. Using durable materials like ivory or stone enhanced the possibility of breastplates being transmitted down several generations and increased the likelihood of their surviving long-distance voyages and other circumstances requiring powerful chiefly authority such as war. In both Fiji and New Zealand, the material that replaced or completed pearl shell was thought to be extremely powerful. It is likely that by the late 1830s, *civavonovono* were considered more efficient in making the *mana* of the chief tangible than their counterparts made only of shell.

This phenomenon was not limited to pearl shell: other chiefly attributes were reproduced in ivory as well. Thus, colonial collections include a number of ivory pendants in the shape of shells and other natural materials indicative of chiefly potency. The collection in the Cambridge University Museum of Anthropology and Archaeology is a case in point. Some ivory ornaments resemble cowrie shells (e.g. #1923.H149). Both white (*bulivula*, *bulidina*) and golden (*bulikula*) cowries used to be strongly associated with high chiefs in Fiji. The same collection also provides examples of plants (#1923.H159) and animals replicated in ivory. These include turtles (#1923.H160), traditionally thought to be connected to the supernatural realm and regarded especially as vehicles

for transcendent beings. Still today they are regarded as sacred food reserved for chiefs and important ceremonial occasions.

Significantly, it seems that pendants evocative of turtles might have been made in pearl shell in the past too. One necklace (#E5164), made before 1832 and now housed in the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts, consists of more than twenty pieces of *civa* shell, cut in the shape of turtles. The five remaining pendants, also in mother-of-pearl, are shaped like elongated triangles, recalling later necklaces, called 'wasekaseka' or 'waseisei'. These were made of whale ivory and were worn as symbols of rank in Fiji, as well as in Tonga and Samoa. They are frequent in early colonial collections.

CHANGING TRADITIONS IN CHIEFLY BODY ADORNMENT

These material transformations reflect the evolution of chiefly authority in Fiji. This includes, perhaps, a growing influence of Tonga in eastern, northern and central Fiji until the second half of the nineteenth century and, arguably, the importation of 'Polynesian' cultural elements by chiefly entourages.²² Key to these changes is the use of whale ivory as a supreme valuable and receptacle of supernatural and chiefly *mana*. Everywhere in the Pacific shells, including pearl shells and other kinds of mother-of-pearl, have been used as tokens of power, as well as to materialize the presence of supernatural and ancestral forces. This is attested in both archaeological records and contemporary practices.²³ In addition to shells, whale ivory served a similar purpose in a number of Pacific cultures, most of them located in the region that Europeans have called Polynesia since the 1830s. Marine ivory seems to have been especially important in places where ruling chiefs were regarded as closely related to powerful transcendent beings. Such traditions are attested, for instance, in Tonga, Hawaii and the Marquesas Islands.²⁴

²² The Fijian archipelago is located at the intersection of the two geo-cultural zones known as 'Melanesia' and 'Polynesia'. Although classified as 'Melanesian' since the 1830s (Dumont d'Urville 1832), Fiji has often been used as an example to undermine such arbitrary classifications of Pacific cultures. Adrienne Kaeppler (1978) and others in particular have shed light on the vast networks of exchange that existed between Fiji, Samoa and Tonga since at least the eighteenth century. These exchanges participated in a complex meshwork of specialization and ensured that, in Fiji and beyond, each island received goods it did not produce in exchange for goods it had specialized in based on natural resources as well as historical arrangements and hereditary knowledge. See, for example, Mariner (1818), Hooper (1982) and Ewins (2009). This, however, should not let us forget the historical connections with 'Melanesia' highlighted by scholars such as Paul Geraghty (1994), David Luders (1996) and David Burley (2013), especially because Fijian-made canoes are known for their ability to travel long distances in every direction (Goodwill, Browning and Anderson 2014, Nuttall, D'Arcy and Philp 2014).

²³ See, for example, the work of Sandra Revolon (2012) in the Solomon Islands.

²⁴ It must be noted that, more recently, body adornments made of sperm whale's teeth have also been described in the Solomon Islands (Richards 2006).

In Fiji, the rise of ivory in chiefly ornaments and other ceremonial items parallels the development and consolidation of highly hierarchized chiefdoms in Bau, Cakaudrove (formerly Somosomo) and Lau – and to some extent also in Rewa and Bua – where contacts with Tonga were significant. Such chiefdoms gravitated around sacred rulers, who were perceived as fundamentally different from those over whom they ruled. Marshall Sahlins (1983, 1985) and others have extensively discussed the consecration of such chiefs in Fiji, where they are regarded as foreign and divine.²⁵ I argue that breastplates illustrate crucial aspects of Fijian paramount authority, including that very connection to the outer world and the divine. In turn, I explore how associations with foreign and non-human realms inform the role of breastplates in a Fijian iconography of sacred potency.

Polished pearl shells were the original breastplates in Fiji. The visual properties of such shells, along with the ivory patterns that were later overlaid on to them, had the ability to evoke the sun, moon and other celestial bodies. At the same time, shells like whale ivory were in essence things from the sea. On an island, everything that is foreign to the land may be seen as coming from either the sea or the sky, or from that space of mythical importance where sea and sky meet. High chiefs, described in local myths as aliens (*kai tani*) and thought to belong to a supernatural realm that transcends the islands, are no exception. In collective imaginaries they were – and still are – repeatedly associated with the sea and its fauna (e.g. turtles, sharks and octopuses), as well as with the sky. Breastplates echo these connections.

At the same time, what makes a mighty chief in Fiji is always his capacity (or *mana*) to rule over the land and its people efficiently and bring them prosperity. Today this is visible in ceremonial occasions. Powerful chiefs, whether alive or dead (through funerals), must be able to gather large amounts of valuables and must allow them to circulate further. For that purpose, they need to implement and maintain strong partnerships with other chiefs and their people. Pearl shells were certainly considered valuable in themselves in the past and were exchanged across the archipelago, efficiently giving material form to the *mana* of the chief, along with his connections to the sea and sky. Subsequently, however, it became important to incorporate ivory into chiefly ornaments. Ivory, too, had an intrinsic value, but it also evoked the ability of the chief to contract powerful alliances in a rapidly changing world. Indeed, like the metal parts that some breastplates incorporate, ivory referred to transactions with Euro-Americans and exchanges with local partners, including Tongan Islanders, customary providers of Western goods, ivory and ivory-made artefacts to Fiji. These imported materials also came from the sea, either literally (whale ivory) or on boats. Breastplates further evoked the marine realm by employing pearl shell, turtle shell (though rarely) and lashing techniques borrowed from canoe-building.

²⁵

See, for example, Hocart (1936), Toren (1994), Hooper (1996) and Graeber and Sahlins (2017). Interestingly, in some places such leaders were said to come from Tonga (Quain 1948:ix–x).

Moreover, one cannot ignore the visual properties of the materials that were assembled into breastplates. Polished pearl shell can be extremely bright and shiny. Iridescent in nature, the colours of mother-of-pearl vary with light and movement. Similarly, metallic parts that are now rusted were probably shiny at first. In sunlight, they must have appeared as dots of pure light. The addition of other materials, such as turtle shell (in the case of Tanoa's *civavonovono*) and ivory, provided spectators with striking contrasts in reflections of light and colours. The ivory frame of *civavonovono* was also contrasted with the skin of Fijian chiefs. As on ceremonial occasions today, it is likely that the chief's body was rubbed in scented coconut oil, literally making him shine. These anointing practices probably contributed to the red patina that ivory breastplates acquired through time and repeated use on the chiefly body, which parallels the prized colour of 'red *tabua*'. This rich brownish colour is classified as 'red' (*damudamu*, *kula*) in Fijian. Brightness, 'red' and 'white' are all qualities associated with sacredness and powerful *mana* throughout the Pacific, including in Fiji.

Typically, a 'red' patina could not be obtained with pearl shell only. Obviously pearl shells were significant and bore unrivalled connections to past traditions, yet composite breastplates could be described as *improved shells*, being brighter, whiter, redder, multi-faceted and more explicitly connected to trade, the supernatural and the outside world. They accumulated features traditionally associated with extraordinary and *tabu* objects in Fiji. They had multiple ways of mesmerizing the chief's audience, from accumulating powerful visual effects to constantly reiterating the chief's sacredness and extraordinary *mana*. Furthermore, pectorals were not used alone, but were key elements in a broader iconography of divine chieftainship. They were worn in association with markers of rank such as head wraps (*isala*) and loincloths (*malo*) made of fine white bark cloth, red and white shells ornaments (e.g. bracelets), body paint and coconut oil. Thus adorned, and almost always armed, the chief must have appeared in public as absolutely powerful and *tabu*.

Even pectorals that are now often regarded as less interesting because of their poorer workmanship are, in essence, accumulations of culturally significant materials and designs. This is true of one breastplate (#14867) currently kept at the Auckland Museum (Fig. 12). It incorporates almost all the materials and features described above as significant: whalebone (main plate), whale ivory (central solar motif), pearl shell (larger solar motif), metal rivets and wire. This concentration helps us understand how breastplates contributed to a broader 'technology of enchantment', which, in the words of Alfred Gell, aimed '[t]o enchant the other person and cause him/her to perceive social reality in a way favourable to the social interest of the enchanter' (1988:7).

Building on the work of Pierre Lemonnier (2012) on non-verbal communication, composite breastplates could also be described as 'perissological resonators', that is, as artefacts that gather elements from several domains of the human experience (sensory experiences, geo-political contexts, mythological and symbolic understandings of the world) and transform them into a non-verbal message. Importantly in Lemonnier's

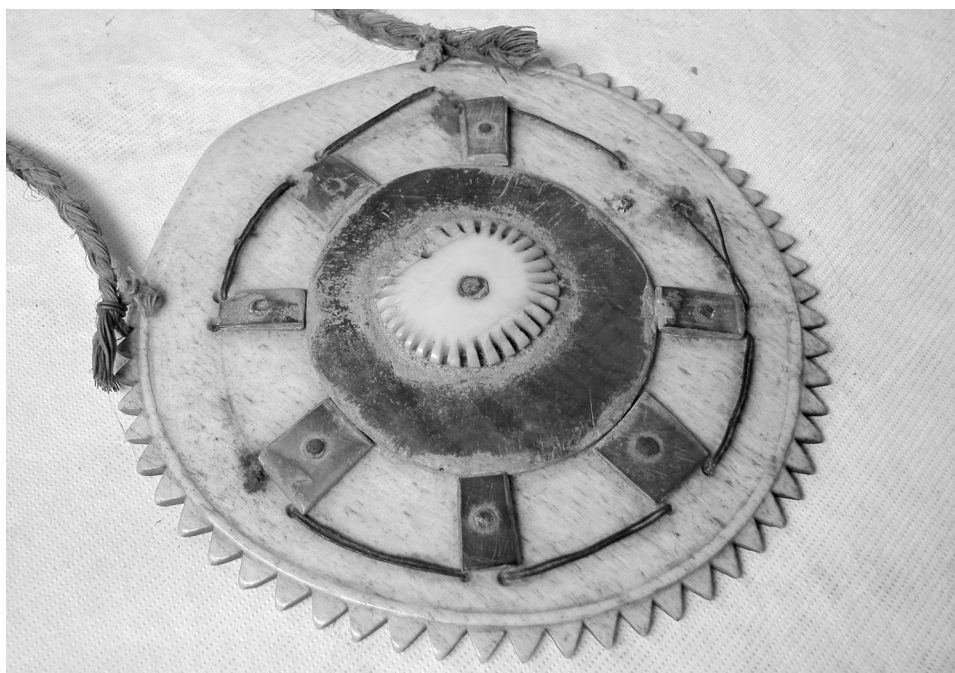


Figure 12: Breastplate. Auckland Museum (#14867)

definition, such ‘resonators’ do not have several ‘meanings’ but simultaneously refer to several elements that contribute to o n e strong message (Lemonnier 2013:22) – in the case of breastplates, ‘this is the almighty chief’.

Now, if composite breastplates provided such an efficient means to express the extraordinary *mana* of chiefs, one might wonder why they are not in use anymore. This is probably due to further changes in local value systems, as well as to a renewal of chiefly functions in Fiji. The democratization of whale ivory and, as a consequence, the production of lower quality artefacts *en masse* might have reduced the power of breastplates and other ivory artefacts to mark chiefly attributes. Under missionary and colonial influence, chiefly families turned to a more ‘civilized’ way of covering the body and renounced traditional symbols of chieftainship associated with pre-Christian times, war and cannibalism. Progressively, chiefly lineages gave away their family heirlooms as powerful gifts or deposited them in museums. Finally, ways of exercising chiefly duties changed. As in the past, chiefs today must bring prosperity to the land through strong partnerships and efficient management, which implies efficiently navigating the modern world. In ritual contexts, traditional body ornaments still prevail: they simply do not consist of breastplates or head wraps (*isala*) anymore. However, many of the qualities

formerly materialized in breastplates are still embodied in ceremonial items such as bark cloths, mats and sperm-whale teeth.

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