

Two unusual *moko* figurines from the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem

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Two unique Easter Island wooden figurines from the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts are described. After iconographic analysis of their common characteristics and comparison with broader Rapanui statuary, a conclusion is reached in which both carvings are ascribed to a subtype of moai moko design also known as a lizardman. A short discussion is given on the possible meaning and significance of the figurines in the broader context of pre-contact Rapanui culture.

El presente artículo está enfocado sobre dos artefactos de madera únicos en colecciones del Peabody Essex Museum en Salem, Massachusetts. El análisis iconográfico de sus características compartidas y la comparación con otras figurillas de arte Rapanui llegan a concluir que los artefactos presentan una variación del diseño de moai moko, también conocido como el hombre-lagarto. Se presenta una discusión sobre el posible significado de las figurillas en el amplio contexto de la cultura Rapanui antes del contacto con el mundo exterior.

The Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, Massachusetts is in the possession of one of the finest collections of Rapanui wood carving in the world. This collection greatly benefited from New England being the hub of the world's whaling industry at the beginning of the 19th century. American whaleships started cruising the southeastern Pacific off the coast of South America from 1789 onwards. At the same time, several European countries were also sending their whaleships, but those were also captained and crewed mostly by Americans (Richards 2008:60). Hawai'i also emerged as a hub for those whalers and fur traders operating in the Pacific. The first whaleship had already visited Easter Island in 1797 (Richards 2008:22-23).

Whalers often bartered with the native inhabitants of various Pacific islands. Although food and water were the main bartered commodities, objects of art were also frequently traded. Those brought back by the sailors were passed on to their families and often eventually ended up in one of New England's museums. The bulk of the objects known today are held in the Peabody Museums in Cambridge and Salem, but smaller collections are also present in other local museums in Springfield, Massachusetts, Providence, Rhode Island, and New Brunswick, Canada.

Among the wealth of early Rapanui art objects with figural representation that were collected, we can distinguish the following five main categories: *moai kavakava*, *moai tangata*, *moai pa'apa'a*, *moai tangata manu* (birdman) and *moai moko* (sometimes called in full *moai tangata moko*). Of those, birdman figurines are the most heterogeneous. Birdman and *moai moko* also share a number of characteristics that allows consideration of a somewhat closer relation. Besides those common categories, there are many figurines

of other forms; turtles, birds, fish, animal and human heads (Klein 1988:83-86; Esen-Baur & Forment 1990:244, 255-258; Orliac & Orliac 1995:84-89). However, none of them form a large coherent group like the five above-mentioned categories. Sometimes all of the Rapanui wooden statues are called *moai kavakava* after the most prominent and numerous type. Other wooden objects from Easter Island, such as *reimiro* and *tahonga* figures can also occasionally take a figurative form (Esen-Baur & Forment 1990:210, 214, 217, 220; Orliac & Orliac 2008:203-209).

Among the many objects from Easter Island in the collection of the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem, there are two figurines of unusual character (Kjellgren et al. 2001:57). Those are E-13896 and E-25404 (Figures 1 and 2, respectively). No other figurines of a similar style are known to exist in any other public or private collection. They are short (23 and 17cm long) and compact zoomorphic representations similar to some extent to the *moai moko* figurines known from many other museums. In the literature they are described as "wooden lizards" (Métraux 1940:258), "crouching mammals" or "aberrant animals" (Heyerdahl 1976:301 and Plates 142 & 143), "curled up mammals" (Klein 1988:249), "squatting figures" (Esen-Baur & Forment 1990:268-9), "crouching zoomorphic figures" (Kjellgren et al. 2001:57) or "crouching figures" (Kaeppler 2003:37).

It is quite surprising that both objects ended up in the same museum, as their provenance is unrelated. According to the catalog card, figure E-13896 was donated to the museum on the 7th of November 1910. Esen-Baur claimed that the object entered the museum before 1870 (Esen-Baur & Forment 1990:269), but there seems to be no evidence to support that claim.



Figure 1. Peabody Essex Museum object #E-13896.

It is most likely mistakenly inserted information from piece E-25404 (see below).

The catalog card lists the donor as:

*“Dr. C. G. Weld
Boston, Mass.”*

But this note was afterward struck out for some reason. In the ‘Remarks’ section of the catalog card there is also the following information:

*“[5 words erased – RW] 7 novbr Wood
of New Bedford. Undoubtedly collected by
a whaler.”*

The picture that emerges from this information seems to be that some Massachusetts whaler, most likely at some point in the 19th century, collected the

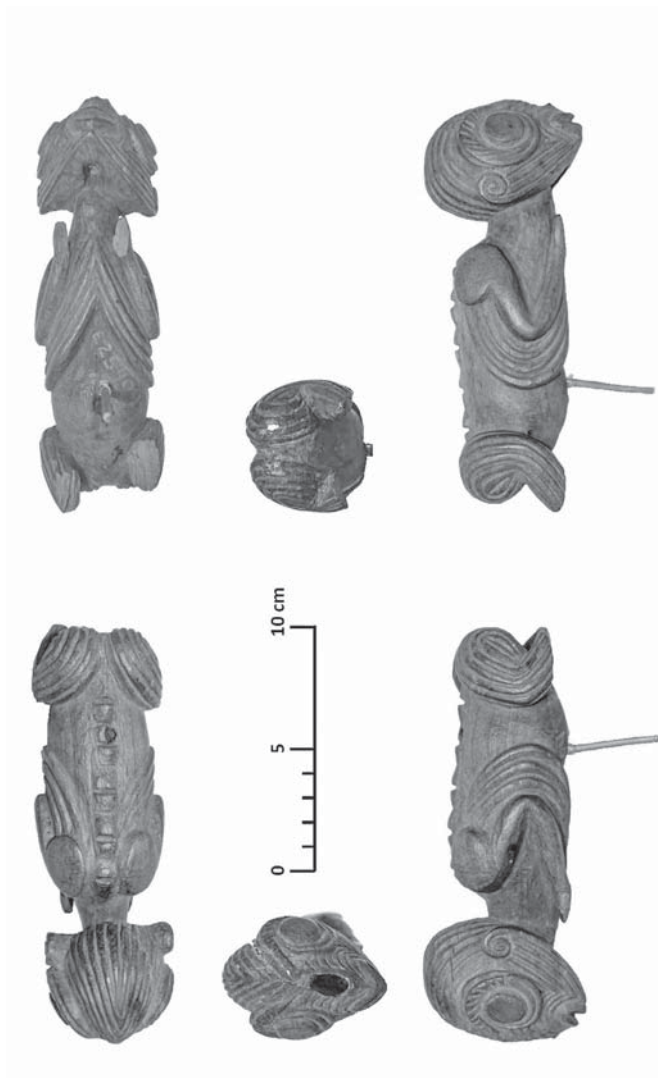


Figure 2. Peabody Essex Museum object # E-25404.

object during his voyages, perhaps by trading on the island itself or somewhere else in the Pacific where this type of object could end up. It is unsure if Dr. C. G. Weld was in any way related to that whaler or whether in fact he was the donor. As such, there is a very small probability of ever establishing the provenance of this object beyond the information stated above.

Object E-25404 has a much richer history. In fact, it belongs to one of the oldest collections of Rapanui figurines (Kaepler 2003:37). The catalog card lists the donor as:

*“Andover Newton Theological School
Newton Centre, Mass.”*

The date received is listed as the 3rd of May 1946, but the collected date is said to be “Before 1870” according to the museum card.

“The Andover Newton Theological School trained missionaries, who, under the auspices of the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, were sent to Hawai‘i and other parts of the Pacific. The Rapanui objects in this collection were probably collected in Hawai‘i and sent with Hawaiian objects to the Andover Newton Theological School for display” (Kaeppler 2002:3). One author (Arning 1931), who visited the Andover Newton Theological School collection in 1886, claims that the objects were brought from Hawai‘i prior to the 1830s. Since there is also a *moai kavakava* figurine from the same collection with provenance dating to before 1833 (Kaeppler 2003:35), it is not imprudent to cautiously assume that E-25404 was collected during the beginning of the 19th century, before the 1830s, thus placing its origin safely in the pre-missionary era and making it one of the oldest collected pieces of Easter Island art.

Both figurines are executed in extremely lightweight wood as their apparent weight is much less than what one expects of a wooden figurine of this size. E-13896 has a characteristic fan ending its spine, a feature possessed by many other Easter Island carvings, principally *moai moko* and birdman statuettes. It also features a hole in the vertebra for hanging the figurine on a suspension cord. The limbs are carved in a crouching position, palms joined on the underside as in many *moko* figurines. The belly is quite prominent, evoking pregnancy, and underneath it is a penis. It has visible ribs and wavy marks on the neck. The head features prominent bulging eyes with deep central depressions for the stone and bone inlays, which are, however, not present. A wide grin goes from

one ear to the next, both of which are shaped in the form of small spiral. Curiously, the lips sport a clear set of notches. Presence of lip notches in Easter Island iconography has been previously discussed by Horley and Lee (2012:17). The authors noted that this kind of hatching is present in depictions of fish, turtles, and birds, but it is not present in lizards, thus giving rise to the notion that it is an iconic depiction of sharpness. The presence of this feature in some stone *moai* could represent a common tattoo motif, which again would originate as a reference to sharpness, perhaps intended to scare off observers. In light of this view, the presence of such notches on the *moko* figurine E-13896 is problematic. However, contrary to Horley and Lee’s assertion that lip notching is not present in lizards, this feature is actually not that uncommon among known *moko* figurines, for example all three *moko* from Oldman’s collection have notches on their lips (Oldman 1940:Plate 87) (Figure 3). Either the view of notches depicting sharpness should be revisited, or lizards’ mouths were somehow also considered sharp in Rapanui animal depictions.

The belly of E-13896 features numerous pinched holes that seem to postdate the time of collection. An old photograph present in the catalog card shows that this object had a display rod inserted at some point, much like the other figure discussed in this paper. Perhaps the mounting attempts were responsible for those marks (Figure 4).

Figure E-25404 has a crouching form similar to the previous one. It has no tail and the head is clearly separated from the rest of the body through the narrow neck. It has the typical emaciated form of Easter Island



Figure 3. Three *moai moko* figurines from the collection of William Oldman, currently in several New Zealand museums (after Oldman 1940).

carvings, with visible prominent ribs and a spine with individual vertebra. The mouth is narrow, but the jaws nevertheless smoothly pass into spiral ears. No sexual organs are visible. The belly features a metal display stand. In the throat there is a rectangular hole in which one finds scraps of printed material (Figure 5). Perhaps

identifying the source of those pages might shed more light on the post-collection fate of the object. Three out of four of the edges of this rectangular hole have rather ragged edges, evoking more of a stone than a metal tool, adding an argument to the notion of antiquity of the object. As one can see in Figure 5, the hole

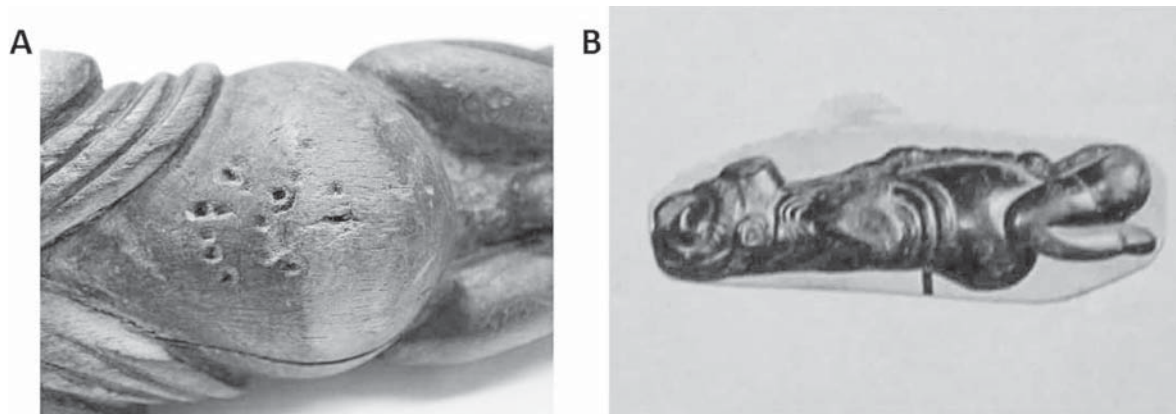


Figure 4. Object E-13896. A. Detail of the belly region showing multiple punctures. B. Old catalog picture of the object showing display stand thrust in the underside.

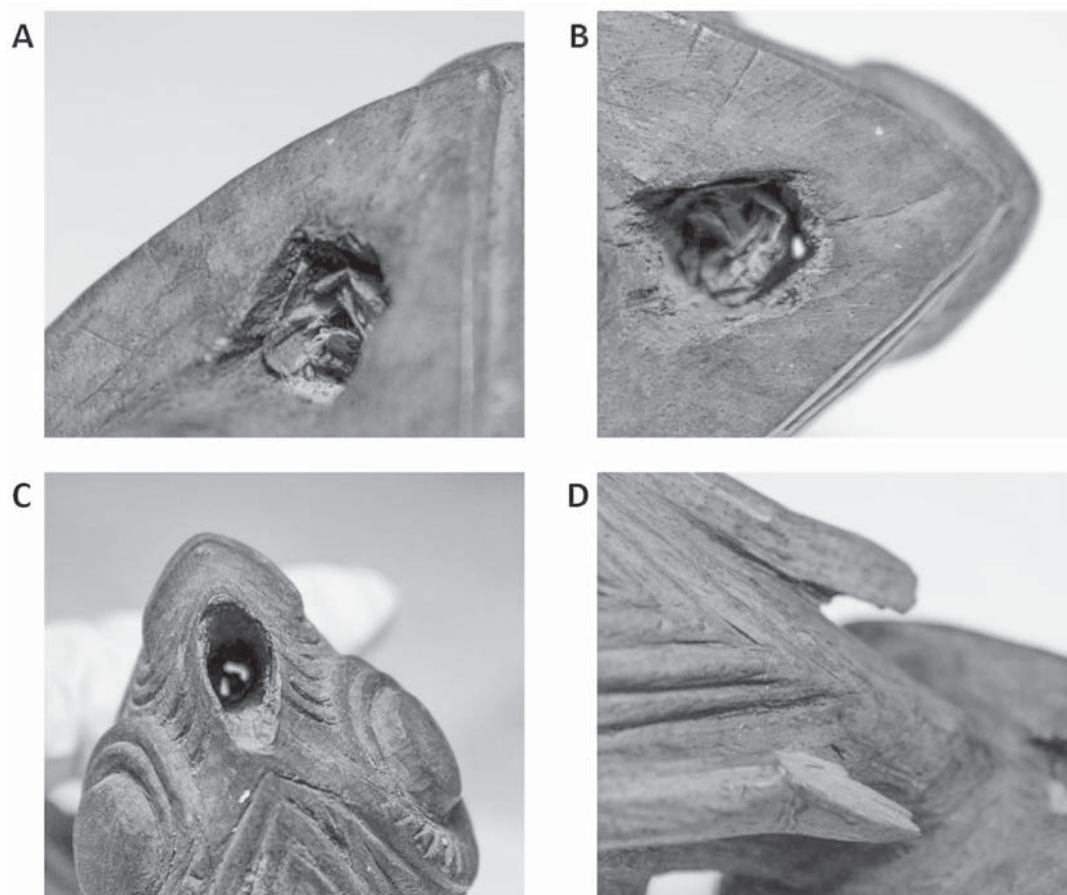


Figure 5. Object E-25404. A. Detail of the throat hole showing scraps of an old paper. B. Detail of the throat hole showing rough edges likely worked out with a stone tool. C. Large nasal cavity is pierced through to the throat allowing the figure to hang on a cord. D. The ends of all four limbs have been sawn off.

passes through the head of the figure to the wide nasal cavity in the face. Perhaps this hole was used to hang the figure on a cord. The ends of all four limbs have unfortunately been sawn off, so we cannot determine the full design of this original figurine.

Both figurines have a number of characteristics allowing us to categorize them as a type of *moai moko* (lizard figurines) or rather *moai tangata moko* (lizardman figurines), as many of their features are human-derived, for example, auricles and external sexual organs are not present in lizards, and navels are present in many *moko* figurines, but not in the two Salem specimens. On the other hand, *moko* figurines very often lack a tail, which is omnipresent in lizards. Also, the shape of the limbs is clearly human and not saurian. In figurine E-25404, it is especially well illustrated in the way the hind limbs curl under the body in a very unsaurian fashion. Orliac and Orliac (2008:145) noted that some *moko* figurines have marks indicating feathers, thus highlighting the hybrid nature of the depicted creature and showing a connection to the birdman concept. It should be mentioned that the idea of lizardman is also present in other Polynesian cultures (Candelot 2001).

Aside from a few similarities, the two Salem figurines have clear differences in relation to the classical *moko* designs. Heyerdahl (1979:27) postulated that both of the figurines were carved by the same artist, but there is no basis for such a statement. Rather, their different provenance and also quite different carving styles point to an opposite conclusion. The most distinctive feature is the position of the hind limbs, which curl under the body instead of being elongated and concave in relation to the whole statuette (Figure 3). This characteristic position adds “crouching figures” as a subcategory among lizardman figures. It is a similar situation to the so-called two “chameleon” figurines, one from St. Petersburg and another from a private English collection (Dederen 2013:399, 423; also see Attenborough 2000), which possess unique common features, the most notable of which are googly eyes and extremely elongated bodies, that nevertheless, based on other attributes, can be positioned within the broader *moai kavakava* category.

Contrary to the notion of the birdman, which is well attested in collected oral traditions, rock art and wooden statuary, the information about the lizardman is much more scarce. Among thousands of documented examples of Easter Island rock art, only five depict lizards (Lee 1992:99-100). Oral traditions regarding the significance of lizard statuettes are also very scant.

The existence of wooden figurines including “grotesque imitations of a human figure” was first noted by members of Captain Cook’s expedition in 1774 (Jakubowska 2014:88). In the 19th century, multiple *moko* figurines entered museum collections

across the world. The first person to explicitly mention lizard figurines was John Linton Palmer (1869:111). Routledge reported stories in which wooden lizard sculptures were used as clubs to kill supernatural beings (Routledge 1919:238). She also mentioned that they were placed on both sides of an entrance to an important house (Routledge 1919:243). Brown (1924:134) also mentioned that they were placed on both sides of an entrance, but he claims they were placed in couples, thus having four protecting wooden lizards per entrance. He also noted the Rapanui fear of lizards and its commonality with other places in Polynesia (Brown 1924:253). Métraux (1940:265-6) also noted that *moai moko* were placed on the side of an entrance to a house for that house’s protection. He also noted that hole perforation meant that they were hung on a string around the neck and were worn during festivals like other wooden images. He postulated that the long end of the image – the prolonged hind limbs – was used to stick the figure into the ground. Métraux also related a story where a spirit was killed with a wooden lizard (Métraux 1940:370).

To this we can add the Rapanui attitude toward lizards themselves. It is often said that their shape and behavior are inclined to penetrate human body orifices – a superstition shared across Polynesia (Orliac & Orliac 2008:145). This fear and disgust is particularly present among women, who are reported to fear that a lizard could run up their legs and impregnate them, resulting in the women giving birth to lizard-like monsters (Lee 2006:117-8).

Sexual symbolism is rife in the *moai moko* figurines. Usually they have a clearly carved penis. Additionally, several known *moko* have a carved *komari* symbol under their jaws (for example, the Brussels, Auckland, and Brooklyn Museum specimens). *Komari* – Rapanui for vulva – is an extremely common motif in Easter Island rock art (Lee 1992:64). In woodwork, however, it is very scant. There are several female figurines with *komari* carved in the anatomically appropriate place. There is also one birdman with its beak in the shape of a *komari* (Horley & Lee 2012:7). Other than these examples, *komari* motifs are only present on the *moko* figurines on the underside of the head. Also, the shape and the size of a typical *moko* resembles the male sexual organ. In this mode we can view the wavy marks on the neck present on some *moko* figurines, including Salem’s E-13896, as a folded foreskin of an erect penis. This design entered native tattoo repertoire and in extension can also be found among the giant stone *moai* (Kjellgren et al. 2001:31, 38, 59). We can postulate the origin as a folded foreskin denoting toughness and virility of the wearer. Looking again at the shape and the size of these *moko*, we could well envision them being used as a part of some sort of fertility-enhancing ritual.

In summary, two unusual crouching figurines from the Peabody Essex Museum in Salem are a subtype of common Rapanui lizardman carvings. Since they are lacking the long sharp hind extensions of classical *moko* figurines, they were designed solely for hanging and not for sticking into the ground. Aside from sexual connotations, these figurines were probably imbued with power of protection from supernatural foes. Since this particular type of lizardman carving representation never became common after the time when the Rapanui initiated woodcarving for barter with the external world, there is a very good chance that we are not only dealing with artistic expressions of genuine needs of pre-contact Rapanui, but that both specimens are also among the oldest collected Rapanui wood figurines.

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