

This episode contains references to war and everything that goes with it. Listener discretion is advised.

Kia ora, gday and welcome to the History of Aotearoa New Zealand. Episode 116: It's Not About Size. This podcast is recorded in Te Whanganui a Tara on the rohe of Muaūpoko, Taranaki Whānui, Te Atiawa and Ngāti Toa Rangatira. We are generously supported by our amazing Patrons, including Errol. If you want to support HANZ go to patreon.com/historyaotearoa. Last time, we discussed the reasons Māori would go to war, such as take and the migrations caused by the changing climate. We also talked about how Māori would try to avoid conflict through systems like taua muru. Today we will look more closely at how Māori waged war starting with rākau, weapons.

Pretty much all weapons that Māori used were for hand to hand, close quarters combat, there are very few examples of any ranged weapons. In general, Māori used three different types of weapons, short, long and extra-long. Often toa, soldiers, would take a long weapon in their hand, like a taiaha, and take a short weapon in their belt as a side arm, like a patu. Though this did depend on their social rank. Today we are going to cover probably the two most famous weapons in Māoridom starting with the shorter weapons and then moving our way up to longer ones. Something else to note is that Māori weapons didn't tend to be very uniform as each one was made to fit the toa who would use it. Not just in the carvings or other cosmetic adornments but also the size, weight and practical characteristics. This was so the toa could wield it as best they could.

So let's start with the shortest weapon cause the interesting thing that you find is that, broadly, the more well-known weapons tend to sit in the short and long categories which also coincides with the weapons that required more skill to use and the ones that nobles tended to wield. No sources I read explicitly made this connection but my guess would be that these factors are related to one another. Patu were the main form of short weapons, commonly called clubs due their appearance as being round but they were actually used more for thrusting. They were usually made from a single piece of wood, stone, whale bone or pounamu, having a wide, flat blade and a heavy pommel. Around 36cm in length, they had an oval shape and since it was a jabbing or stabbing weapon, the front edge of the blade was sharpened. Through the pommel or just above it would sometimes be a hole through which a cord would be thread through and tied off, allowing the patu to be attached to the wrist like a Wiimote. Primarily this was to stop the toa from dropping the patu when it became wet with sweat or blood but could possibly also been used to help swing the patu around the wrist in a very flashy style. As with all weapons that Māori wielded, patu were handmade and so no two were the same, often being very different in size, weight and balance and could even somewhat personalised by the potential wielder. A key part of how Māori fought with their weapons was all about quickness and being fleet of foot and so speed, agility and quick footwork were all desired skills ins someone being able to use a patu. If someone was particularly skilled, they could wield a patu in one hand with a cloak over their free arm acting as a bit of armour. This would allow them to fight someone with a taiaha or spear, which naturally had an advantage of reach.

As a side note, I mentioned armour briefly just before. There wasn't a huge variety of armour in Aotearoa, most preferring to simply wear a maru but the pauku was a relatively common form of 'armour' worn by toa. It is a cloak that has the aho, threads, really close together, in a similar way to how tāniko is made. This was designed to block spear thrusts primarily. Generally, pauku were only worn by rangatira, likely because of the skill and time needed to make them meant they were very expensive. Before entering battle, the pauku would be soaked to allow the fibre to absorb the water and swell, further closing any gaps between the threads and providing more protection, though I'm guessing this made it really fucking heavy. A chief clothed in a pauku would often be on the front lines acting like a tank, taking the enemies spear thrusts so that his mates could be free to attack

with their own spears with less risk, while the chief himself would often be armed with a short weapon like a patu. Tāpahu served a similar purpose but were made of dog skins stitched together. These cloaks usually weren't worn on the road to battle, any normal chiefly clothes may be worn, like kakahu huruhuru and the armour would be donned upon the even of battle.

The kinds of areas on the body that someone with a patu would try to hit would be the temple, jaw and ribs with the pommel being used to finish people off, such as giving them a jab in their guts with the blade then swinging around to bash them on the back of the head with the pommel when they double over, which was a common technique. All of this information is true for all patu broadly but we can delve a bit deeper into each type as they were categorised by Māori based on the material.

Patu ōnewa were probably the most common type of patu and there are a lot of examples of them in collections not just in Aotearoa but all across the world. Which is kinda interesting since it isn't as decorated or prestigious as other weapons, which is usually what drove Europeans to want to collect them. There are stories of some patu ōnewa being made specifically for trade with Pākehā, designed to look like old artifacts that they would want in their collections and so would pay good money for them. However, The patu ōnewa were made of fine grained rocks and had a smooth, shiny finish. Ōnewa refers to a specific dark grey stone that was used but reddy brown, black and light grey stones could be used as well which added to the uniqueness of each patu. To make a patu ōnewa, the first step was obviously to select the desired stone and start hammering away at it to remove chunks to get it down to the rough shape. Initially it would be big chunks and then smaller and smaller chunks would be smashed off to further refine it. The edge of the blade would then be flaked to a make it quite fine, first by hammering it and then grinding on sandstone. Next the hole was drilled for the tau, that's the Wiimote cord, a hammer stone would be used to make a dent and then a hand powered drill that we talked about in our early episodes would do the rest of the work with drilling alternating from both sides until they met in the middle. Some grooves could be carved into the pommel but not always since these were pretty much only cosmetic and took a lot of skill, time and effort to make. The final part would be to grind the edge to the desired sharpness as at this point it was a mostly blunt and flat.

Patu parāoa was usually made of sperm whale bone, usually jaw bones. Some could have quite elaborate carving and these tended to be handed down over the generations, getting a bit of a gold patina from all the use. They tended to be about 43cm in length and about 2cm in depth at their thickest but some could be even thinner than that though. These thinner ones were usually convex and made from the crowns of sperm whale skulls rather than the jaw. Since bone was a bit easier to work with than stone, some of the pommels could have intricately carved figures instead of the simple grooves. In the 'crossguard' area there could a carving depicting face with some paua inlaid eyes, with the blade itself looking like a large tongue. Patu of this type were also commonly held by chiefs due to their rarity and used to gesture when making whaikorero on the marae.

Wahaika means mouth of the fish and refers to the distinctive shape of this patu, instead of being oval shaped it has a notch or missing bit on the back edge which looks like part of the patu has been removed to leave a curve, sometimes with a slightly hooked point. Wahaika were generally made from whale bone or wood, stone doesn't seem to have been used, potentially because the hardness of stone didn't lend it'self well to making the unusual shape. As with other patu, the pommell was carved and many had a small manaia or other humanoid figure just above the handle in the back end curve, filling the gap a little. Again due to their rarity both because of materials and the fact they were intricately carved, they were often wielded by rangatira.

The kotiate was another distinctive patu and prized by rangatira both for combat and speeches. It has a unique shape with a notch on each side of the blade, resulting in a shape that kinda looks like two half circles with rounded edges touch each other in the middle. Apparently the notches were used to “entwine the intestines and other organs of the vanquished enemy” which is apparently related to the name of the weapon, which translates to cut liver, though it could also refer to the fact that the blade looks like a liver cut in half. These were usually about 32cm in length and made of whale bone, less often made of wood. Wooden ones had a lot of carving whereas whalebone ones pretty much only had carving on the handle.

Mere pounamu was a very special weapon, probably one of the most coveted and revered, particularly for what it symbolised as well as how rare they were and difficult to make, leading to them being very expensive. As you might guess, they were made of pounamou greenstone so they were very hard to acquire since most pounamou in Aotearoa originates from the West Coast of the South Island, hence the name, Te Wai Pounamu, The Waters of Greenstone. Some mere were buried with their owners but some were passed down through the generations, gaining more mana as they passed through the hands of each person, particularly if they were famous. Some mere were given names and were said to have acquired various virtues such as Te Rauparaha who had a mere called Tuhiwai which apparently had the ability to tell the future, which it did by changing colour. It wasn't unheard of for prisoners to be asked to be executed by a specific mere, such was their fame. Much like patu ōnewa, mere could have a lot of visual variation. Pounamu itself has lots of different variations from light sea greens to deep dark forest greens. One type of greenstone is even called weka's blood on account of the red streaks that run through the stone. Apart from the colour, their length and weight could vary quite a lot too. Most mere that still exist in museums are between 25-43cm, the average being about 35.5cm. This was most likely down to the fact that mere, as with all patu, were made from a single piece of pounamu so the size of the original stone dictated the size of the final weapon. As you might expect, working with pounamu was extremely slow and tiring work which required much patience and skill, if anything because you didn't want to fuck up a weapon that could be your lasting legacy through the generations.

Although patu are the most famous and well researched of the short weapon class, there are a couple of others that are less well known, in part because they don't survive as well in the museum collection record. The oka was a rare weapon that was kinda like a dagger, usually made from wood or bone. Tales of its use before Europeans don't exist so it is possible that it is in fact a Māori recreation of a European dagger that was developed soon after the two cultures met. It apparently didn't see much use but from what little we do know about oka, they do seem to have been used as stabbing weapons, “In perhaps the best known account of the use of an oka, Colonel Walter Edward Gudgeon tells of an old chief named Nga Tokowaru who was in the habit of carrying a bone dagger concealed in his war belt. After a desperate battle in which he was captured, Nga Tokowaru was taken before the chief of the victors, one Te Patu. Taking his last opportunity to save his descendants from eternal shame and degradation, he drew his hidden dagger and stabbed the unsuspecting Te Patu. He then quickly smeared the chief's tapu blood over his own head and body, knowing that his captors would not eat his flesh once it had been covered with the chiefly blood of Te Patu.”

Another rare weapon was the pātuki, it is the only Māori weapon that was designed to be used single handed with downward strokes like a club, rather than the thrusts of the patu. It was roughly the same length as the patu but its material was usually restricted to wood with a few whalebone examples. They were a bit more triangular or diamond shaped than patu with convex sides, resulting in the club/blade having a bit of a spine. They were often heavily carved all over and had a hole for a cord to be wrapped around the waist.

Moving into the medium sized weapons let's start with the most famous of not just this category but probably the most famous Māori weapon of them all, the taiaha. Taiaha are known by a few different names around the country, maipi, hani and taieha in the South Island but most people would know them as taiaha so that's what we are gonna call them. They were usually made of tough woods that were light making them strong but easy to handle, trees like kānuka, mānuka and maire. Whalebone was used occasionally but it was pretty rare given it was hard to come by. Taiaha varied in length from about 1.2m to nearly 2m and their design can be split into three basic sections. The rau is the blade or club-like portion. This was flat and wide, usually 6-7cm in width, though it could be slightly smaller depending on personal preference. The shaft was the middle part which was oval in shape and then the other end was the upoko, of which there were two carved heads back to back with their arero, tongue, sticking out which was also decorated in carvings and acted as the pointy stabby end. Usually the eyes of the two upoko had paua inlaid but it could also use oyster and pipi with gum from tarata or harakeke acting as glue to hold them in place. Some iwi called the eyes ruru after the shiny eyes of the morepork whereas others said that the eyes kept watch for enemies. Sometimes the eyes be without any paua or even have pupils on one side and no pupils on the other. This actually wasn't an indication that the taiaha was incomplete and apparently it was a stylistic choice but we don't really know why. In addition to the taiaha itself they would be adorned around the upoko with feathers or kurī fur, if you were rich. Sometimes both feathers and fur could be added and weaving them together was quite an intricate process so again, you had to be rich or special to get that on your weapon. When the taiaha wasn't being used, this adornment would be protected by wrapping it in leaves. The fur and feathers weren't just for indicating status though, they also served a practical, battlefield purpose. The taiaha was often swung around quite a lot, used to parry, stab and bash so those feathers would be flitting around, flashing their colours in front of the face of the enemy. The idea was that your opponent may get distracted by the adornment, their eyes following them just a little, causing them to lose the briefest amount of focus. It wouldn't be much and I doubt it worked as well on experienced toa but even a split second of distraction in a duel could be the difference between life or death.

As with many items, the more carved and elaborate taiaha were usually held by rangatira and were often seen when they made whaikorero at hui. As such they were seen as a symbol of chiefly authority. In battle, the common guard, or way of holding the weapon, would be to hold the taiaha vertically or diagonally across the body with the rau to Rangī and the arero to Papa. Fighting with a taiaha involved a lot of feints and had the person moving around a lot to try and find an opening, in fact Māori combat in general was all about being fast and quick on your feet. A popular feint was to look like you were going to stab with the arero and then while the enemy move back, swap hands and strike with the rau at their head. If done properly and with ample force, it could cave in the skull and kill instantly. A technique that was taught to young toa in training was to watch the enemies big toe as it was believed that the toe gripping the ground was an indication that the enemy was about to strike, giving just an extra little bit of time for the defender to dodge or parry. Again, not much but every tiny advantage counts when the default tactic was to move quickly.

So taiaha are quite cool because they are very versatile, one end is for striking and the other for stabbing. The stabbing end has resulted in some people calling it a spear but others disagree with assessment given it has a bit more going on and due to this versatility it required a high amount of skill to use it effectively. To end this episode I want to share a couple of stories that I found that talk about the effectiveness of the taiaha because despite it falling out of favour for actual combat after the introduction of firearms to Aotearoa, it never lost its mana and its prowess was still proven years later, such as in this account from WW2 which was published in the Rotorua newspaper The Daily Post in 1965.

“The old Maori weapon the taiaha can be deadly when wielded by an expert. This was proved in a taiaha and rifle and bayonet duel at a small arms weapon training school at Maadi, in the Middle East, in 1943. The school was an important centre in which men of the 8th Army were given an intensive training course in every infantry weapon, from revolvers to bayonets. In this particular course there were Americans, Free French, English, New Zealanders and a sprinkling of Cypriot and Canadian troops. Most of them were junior officers, and the pace was on in readiness for Montgomery's all out 'push' at El Alamein.

In one of the bayonet fighting sessions, Major (then Lieut.) Don Stewart, Whakatane, remarked to his hard-bitten instructors: This is quite a weapon, I only know of one to beat it! What's that? asked the instructor. 'The Maori taiaha.' 'What the **** is that?' 'A fire-hardened wooden stave and fending spear,' replied Lieut. Stewart. The derision and scorn this remark provoked, stung the young Whakatane man to the quick. As a result he offered to prove his point. Immediately bets were offered at great odds that the man with a Maori weapon would be dead within seconds against an expert with a rifle. mounted bayonet.

So it was arranged - the best bayonet exponent was to be matched against an expert armed only with the Maori taiaha. The event caused more than a stir when it was seen that Don was serious. Time and place were arranged. Money flowed. The Maori champion was Lieut. Aubrey Rota, Matata, who had luckily brought one of the time-honoured weapons with him from New Zealand.

There was a large and amused audience representing every section of the trainees at the fighting pitch. Rota was warned that he would have to take full risk of being wounded or worse, and that the incident would be officially regarded as an exercise in the combat school. 'Accidents were a fairly frequent occurrence in combat school exercises. The young Maori was willing enough. There would be no holds barred on either side. Stripping off his tunic, he stood facing the grinning modern in much the same way as his forebears had faced the British redcoats a century ago. Rota was an expert.

The signal to start was given. The soldier lunged and thrust in perfect precision, but each more was parried by the light footed Maori who bided his time and stood on the defensive. The Pakeha grew cunning. Failing to penetrate the Maori's guard he feinted and tried to tempt an attack. But his opponent was too wise. There was rising anger in the actions and expression of the khaki warrior as thrust after thrust was tossed aside by the stout wooden weapon. Sometimes it was repelled with such violence that it was flung sideways. To the accompanying cries of the somewhat dumbfounded onlookers the soldier gathered himself. Feinting smartly he emulated an old Army trick, crouched and charged directly at the Maori. This was Rota's chance. Grasping his weapon firmly, he sidestepped tipped aside the blind thrust, and caught the lunging figure a smart upper-cut in the stomach with the bladed end of the taiaha. In a flash he whirled the weapon about, to crash the business end on to his opponent's skull. Down he went, to be out of action for some days in the camp hospital - another regrettable accident from the small arms school. The effect upon those present was profound. Money changed hands at great odds, as the jubilant minority collected. The story was repeated with almost unbelievable astonishment throughout the Middle East.”

The other story comes from the late 19th century where a Māori Member of Parliament approached some Pākehā blokes in a restaurant called Bellamy's.

“The witness of this remarkable duel was an old military friend of mine who one night found himself in Bellamy's with his colonel discussing the pros and cons of weapons of war in general. The old colonel was emphatic that nothing could touch the sword as a personal weapon. In the hands of a

champion, he said, it could easily outclass any other weapon known. The conversation was interrupted by a well-known Maori MP who politely remarked: 'Excuse me, sir, but I do not agree with you. Our Maori taiaha in the hands of an expert is superior to your Pakeha sword. Furthermore, if you wish it pick the best swordsman in your camp and I will match him with a Maori champion and prove my words. If you like we can arrange a duel here, and to prove my sincerity here is £100 to back my man.' The only concession asked by the MP was that he be given two weeks in which to produce his champion.

The colonel was taken back, but in the face of all the excitement, accepted the challenge. Drinks were served, and bets made. The date was fixed and the news spread.

In Newtown camp at the time there happened to be a prominent swordsman who had twice won the honours at Aldershot. He was a regimental sergeant-major, perfectly built and completely confident. The interest was terrific. Bellamy's was crowded, not only with parliamentarians but with military and naval personnel. Odds were heavily against the chances of the Maori. The sergeant major was there, smartly uniformed as a member of the Royal Horse Artillery he cut a striking figure, calmly assured and fully confident of the superiority of his weapon. He made a tremendous impression.

The Maori MP turned up with his champion - a giant reputed to be 80 years old. There he stood in front of the select and fashionable Pakeha audience clad only in his flax piupiu. His head was adorned with a flowing mane of snow-white hair and the heavy tattoo marks on his wizened old face gave way to an unkempt beard reaching almost to his waist. In his hands he clutched the weapon of his forefathers. It was a beautifully carved taiaha, smooth and polished till it shone. He cut a truly Homeric figure as he stood waiting for the signal to begin ...

With the word 'engage' the Maori at once took the offensive. With a shout and a bound he made a sweeping blow at the legs of the soldier. Keen and alert, the officer neatly parried and evaded the action, bending slightly forward as he did so. The Maori's reaction was almost too swift for the eye to follow ... Leaping upward and back, with a swift reversal of his weapon he struck a sharp upward blow with the spear-headed staff. It connected with the Pākehā's chin, lifted him clean of his feet and hurled him flat on his back to the floor.

There was dead silence as the spectators watched the Māori champion move over to the still and apparently lifeless figure. The Maori knelt beside the inert form, gently touching and talking softly. It took a long time for the vanquished officer to come round, and when he did he had to be carried from the field of battle.

The duel had lasted exactly 30 seconds! Bets were settled, and Bellamy's buzzed as the drinks were consumed to the honour of the old Maori warrior."

Next time, we will keep talk about weapons with some less fancy but more shall we say, egalitarian ones as well as discussing a couple of interesting outliers!

If you want to send me feedback, ask a question, suggest a topic or just have a chinwag you can find my email and social media on historyaotearoa.com. You can also find helpful resources there like transcripts, sources and translations for some of the Te Reo Māori we have used. You can help support HANZ through Patreon, buying merch or giving us a review, it means a lot and helps spread the story of Aotearoa New Zealand. As always, haere tū atu, hoki tū mai. See you next time!