

# Sites of Defence Within Picturesque Scenes:

## Late eighteenth century representations of natural architecture in New Zealand

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Candles that flicker in the fissured tombs  
Are the departed ghosts where only stones remain  
Articulate, Dolman or menhir  
Are giant's teeth, sown in a promised land,  
Which promise has abandoned. (Rykwert, 1951: n.p.)

### **Joseph Banks and the arts-science model**

On 24<sup>th</sup> October 1769, inland of Tolaga Bay on the East Coast of New Zealand, the gentleman naturalist Joseph Banks (1743-1820) recorded:

We saw also as [sic.] extraordinary natural curiosity. In pursuing a valley bounded on each side by steep hills we on a sudden saw a most noble arch or Cavern through the face of a rock leading directly to the sea, so that through it we had not only a view of the bay and hills on the other side but an opportunity of imagining a ship or any other grand object opposite to it. It was certainly the most magnificent surprise I have ever met with, so much is pure nature superior to art in these cases: I have seen such places made by art where from an appearance totally inland you was led through an arch 6 feet wide and 7 high to a prospect of the sea, but here was an arch 25 yards in length, 9 in breadth and at least 15 in height. (1962: I.419)

It was an extraordinary setting and Banks was openly struck by it. Although he had seen similar sites in Britain, none were quite like this. Between February 1777 and January 1778 he had made several scientific excursions through England and Wales, where he had visited Iron Age caves and several country seats with newly constructed sham temples, ruins and grottoes (Carter 1988: 42-54). He visited recent projects including Burton Pysent in Somerset by Capability Brown and Piercefield in Monmouthshire by Valentine Morris with its grotto and sham Giant's Cave (Carter 1988: 44-45). Despite – or possibly because of – this experience, the scene at Tolaga Bay clearly moved him.

Although he did not discuss the arch in his journal, James Cook (1728-1779) marked it on his chart. In the subsequent 1773 official account of the voyage, London-based John Hawkesworth (1720-1773) included a drawing of the arch produced from a drawing by J. J. Barralet after an in situ drawing by Banks' secretary during the voyage, Herman Diedrich Spöring (1733-1771) (Joppien and Smith 1985: 171-73). Sydney Parkinson also produced his own drawing (Fig. 1).



Fig. 1 "View of a curious arched Rock, having a River running under it, in Tolago Bay..." In Parkinson, *Journal of a voyage to the South Seas*. 1784. J.C. Beaglehole Room, Victoria University of Wellington. Fildes 1533.

As Bernard Smith has noted, there were two interconnected ways of relating to the landscape in the eighteenth century. One was scientific and required accurate recordings of the natural phenomena in order to meet the requirements of the Royal Society. The other attitude was aesthetic, which demanded that the landscape be transformed to conform to various pictorial conventions (Smith 1985: 1-7, 29). Francis Pound has described the dominant pictorial conventions influencing the representation of the New Zealand landscape. Banks' poetic description of the "noble arch" contains qualities that link it with the conventions of the picturesque and the "ideal landscape" (1983: 21). One of the features of the ideal landscape was that it was a construct of the artist's imagination. Images formed through this convention were only intended to give a general idea of the specific landscape represented. The landscape becomes a vehicle for the "pleasures of formal and poetic arrangement" (Pound 1983: 21). Banks' description reveals a clear tension between the two interconnected frameworks through which landscape was understood. His suggestion that there was not only a view of hills on the other side, but an opportunity to imagine a ship, aligns with the practices of the picturesque and the ideal. The landscape is being mined for its potential to form a seductive image. His description is initially of the potential of the noble arch for creating an artistic image. He then follows this with the arch's physical dimensions. The inclusion of such data conforms to the type of information demanded by empiricism. The authority generated by the inclusion of neutral description sits alongside the earlier comment's loose relationship to accuracy.

Two weeks after leaving Tolago Bay, crewmembers of Cook's ship, the *Endeavour*, recorded another natural arch, surrounded by water at Mercury Bay in the Coromandel Peninsula of New Zealand's North Island. This was known to Māori as Te Puta-o-Paretauhinu (the hole of Paretauhinu) (Porter 1978: 75). Banks declared it to be the "most beautifully romantick thing I ever saw". He continued:

It was built on a small rock detachd from the main and surroundd at high water, the top of this was fencd round with rails after their manner but was not large enough to contain above 5 or 6 houses; the whole appeard totally inaccessible to any animal who was not furnished with wings, indeed it was only aproachable by one very narrow and steep path, but what made it most truly romantick was that much the largest part of it was hollowd out into an arch which penetrated quite through it and was in hight not less than 20 yards perpendicular above the water which ran through it. (1962: I. 432)

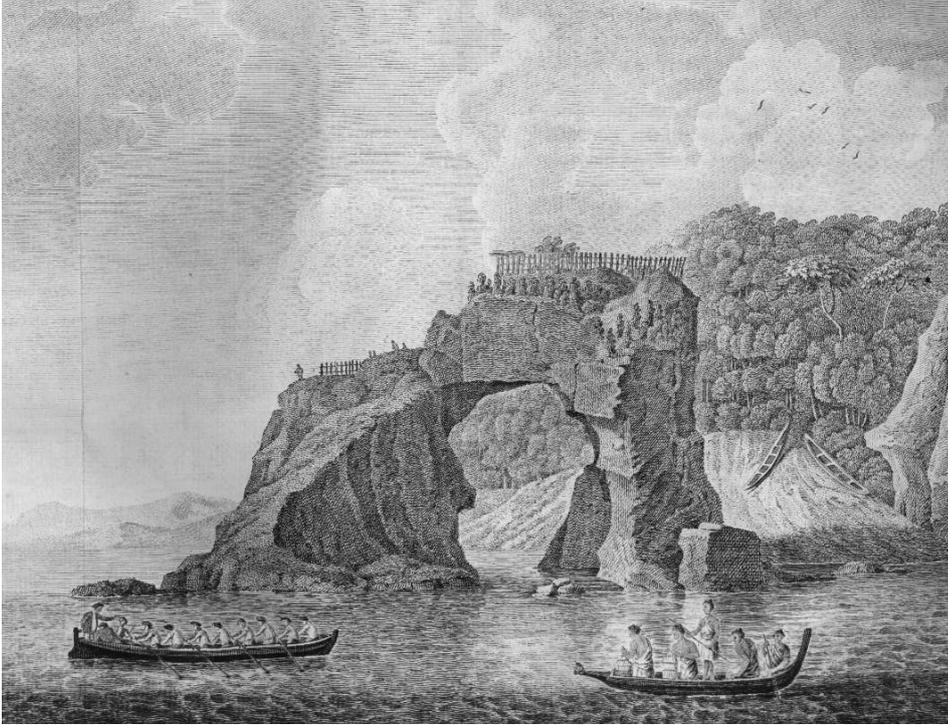


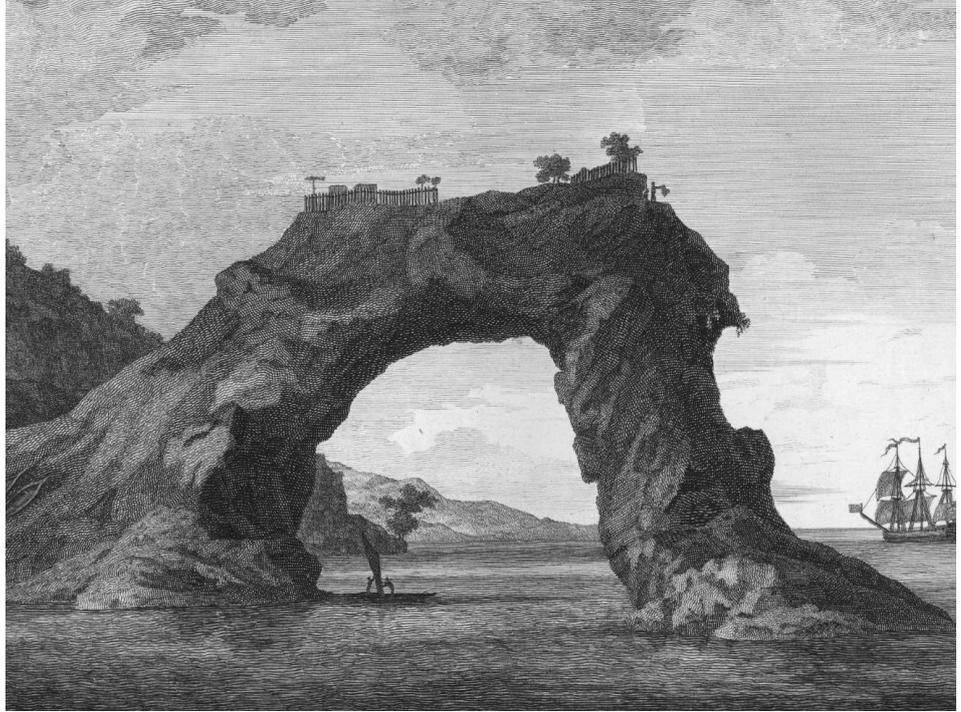
Fig. 2 "A fortified town or village called a Hippah built on a perforated rock at Tolaga in New Zealand." In Hawkesworth, *An account II*, 1773. J.C. Beaglehole Room, Victoria University of Wellington. Fildes 1524.

Banks' omission of the function of the arch is a reflection of the aesthetic framework through which he perceived the feature. Within the aesthetic framework of the picturesque, the geometry of the arch signifies the presence of an order within nature. Banks' aesthetic appreciation of the ocean outcrop demonstrates his cultural capital as he draws upon the image repertoire of Western landscape painting to locate an art affect within natural phenomena. Banks' cultivation of the practice of aesthetic appreciation is in keeping with the advocates of the picturesque, who shifted aesthetic knowledge away from a vocabulary of ideal forms to the practice of sensitivity to sensual experience.

Spöring illustrated the Te Puta-o-Paretauhinu pā on the outcrop, labelling it "Spöring's Grotto" (Salmond 1991: 203). He showed the eastern side of the arch with a large figure standing on the ridge waving a cloth or eel trap. Two canoes were drawn up on the mainland shore, although none are visible in the sea. A waving figure is over-scaled. If Banks' estimate of the arch height of 18 metres (20 yards) is reliable, then this figure represents a man over four metres high. This exaggeration is odd given Spöring's otherwise accurate topographic record. It is reminiscent of the giant and somewhat intimidating armed figures depicted by Isaacs Gilsemans in his drawing of the Three Kings Islands in the account of Tasman's voyage to New Zealand in 1642 (Salmond 1991: 83). In London, J.J. Barralet produced a pencil drawing, from Spöring's image, for reproduction as an engraving in Hawkesworth's official account of the voyage (Fig. 2). He appears to have reduced the size of the figure to be proportionate with the 18-metre arch. In the foreground he added two boats: an eight-oared boat from the *Endeavour* holding 11 people, and a small Māori canoe holding five. The European oarsmen are rowing strenuously, while the Māori figures (which are taken from sketches made by Sydney Parkinson (1745-1771) at Queen Charlotte Sound) are relaxed and stationary. Together these groups contrast the modern European work ethic with notions of native sloth. To use Anthony Vidler's expression, this view was "ratified by anthropology" (1987: 11).

Parkinson also illustrated the pā on the natural arch, showing the western face of the promontory. Although the original image is lost, it formed the basis for an engraving entitled *View of an Arched Rock, on the Coast of New Zealand; with an Hippa, or Place of Retreat, on the Top of it* that was included in Parkinson's posthumous journal, which was controversially published almost simultaneously with the Hawkesworth edition (Fig. 3) (Joppien and Smith 1985: 53-54). The im-

Fig. 3 "View of an Arched Rock, on the Coast of New Zealand; with an Hippa, or Place of Retreat, on the Top of it." In Parkinson, *Journal of a voyage to the South Seas*. 1784. J.C. Beaglehole Room, Victoria University of Wellington. Fildes 1533.



age shows two canoes hauled up on the landward side of the arch, one Māori canoe with a sail under the arch, a Māori waving from the ridge and on the right in the distance the *Endeavour* was shown under sail. Parkinson's journal noted:

We saw one of their Hippas, which was situated on a very high rock, hollow underneath, forming a most grand natural arch, one side of which was connected with the land; the other rose out of the sea. Underneath this arch a small vessel might have sailed. It was near a pleasant bay, and almost inaccessible: one of the natives came out and waved a large garment, or piece of cloth, to us as we passed along. (Parkinson 1773: 160)

A few months later, the image was reproduced in the *London Magazine* in a composite engraving entitled, *Hippa, or Place of Retreat on an Arch'd Rock in New Zealand, with a War Canoe: & a Non Descript Animal of New Holland* (illustration of the engraving annexed 1773). As with the Parkinson image, the cut showed a Māori waving a piece of cloth from the ridge, two canoes hauled up on land, and a Māori canoe with a sail under the arch. To this was added another elaborately carved canoe taken from another engraving from Parkinson's volume and a kangaroo, which was probably derived from an engraving in Hawkesworth: that, in turn, was copied from a painting by George Stubbs (Smith 1985: Pl. 1; Parkinson 1773: Pl. XVIII). There was no sign of the *Endeavour* to the right. The accompanying text stated that there were two pā on the arched rock.

Two years later, this image formed the basis for another similarly titled image of the arch with canoe and kangaroo, which was reproduced in a pirated Dublin edition of Hawkesworth's text (Fig. 4). This mirrored the image in the *London Magazine* engraving, although the waving figure was removed and the arch was instead shown covered with rampant vegetation. Through the next few decades, European draftsmen and engravers retraced and reworked the seminal images to the extent that they became emblematic views of the newly discovered lands. Joseph Michael Gandy included the arch, *sans* habitation, in his 1838 composite landscape, *Architecture its natural model* (Smith 1985: 35). Hawkesworth's 1773 description of the settlement on the arch relied heavily on Banks' journal. This is not surprising as Cook made only limited reference to the Te Puta-o-Paretauhinu pa, instead focusing on two other more extensive examples in the vicinity (1968: I.197-203). Cook discussed the fortification, topography, ditches, palisades and internal arrangement of the larger nearby pa called Wharetaewa. With a popu-



Fig. 4 "Hippa or Place of retreat on an Arch'd rock in New Zealand with War Canoe & a Non-Descript Animal of New Holland." In *London Magazine*, August 1773, Private collection.

lation of 100 people when he visited, it was an elaborate development, and he took pains to describe its difficult access and how defensible it would be under attack. He also praised the site of another highly structured remnant pā (near the present day settlement of Whitianga), writing "the Situation is such that the best Engineer in Europe could not have choose'd a better for a small number of men to defend themselves against a greater; it is strong by nature, and made more so by Art" (1968: I.197). Cook's use of the word 'Art' here refers to fortification rather than artistic creation. In keeping with the tone of his journal, he did not indicate any aesthetic engagement with the natural structure. His discussion of the settlements at Mercury Bay focuses on the design of the fortifications created by Māori. He was clearly impressed by their military function. His attention to the Māori fortification is understandable given Britain's economic and political interests in the new territories within the Pacific. Assessing indigenous peoples' ability to resist colonisation was an obvious advantage from the voyage. Cook does not appear to share Rousseau's romantic view of primitive people as free from the desire for acquisition of power and wealth. Cook noted the intense rivalries between Māori tribes and the energy expended on warfare. He connected the relative simplicity of Māori dwellings and objects to their frequent battles and territorial rivalries, rather than to their close connection to nature, writing:

... their Canoes are mean and without ornament, and so are their houses or huts and in general every thing they have about them. This may be owing to the frequent wars in which they are certainly engaged, strong proofs of this we have seen, for the people who resided near the place where we wooded and who slept every night in the open air plac'd themselves in such a manner when they laid down to sleep as plainly shewed that it was necessary for them to be always upon their guard. (1968: I.203)

During times of siege, Māori retreated to their pā, taking defensive positions. Cook understood the pā on the natural arch to be a defensive strategy, rather than a manifestation of an aesthetic appreciation of the landscape. He wrote of the Wharetaewa and Te Puta-o-Paretauhinu pā:

Under the foot of the point on which this Village stands are 2 Rocks the one just broke off from the Main and other detached a little from it, they are both very small and more fit for birds to inhabit than men yet there are house[s] and places of defence on each of them, and

about a Mile to the Eastward of these is a nother of these small fortified Rocks which communicates with the Main by a narrow pathway where there is a small Village of the natives; many works of this kind we have seen upon small Islands and Rocks and Ridges of hills on all parts of the Coast besides a great number of fortified towns, to all appearances Vastly superior to this I have described —

From this it should seem that this people must have long and frequent wars, and must have been long accustomed to it otherwise they never would have invented such strong holds as these, the erecting of which must cost them immense labour considering the tools they have to work with which are only made of wood & stone ... .  
(1968: I.199-200)

In contrast to Cook's accounts, there is a tension between two models of truth at play within Banks' encounter with the natural arches. The essential truth of the landscape that art can bring to presence is in tension with the scientific model of truth where attentiveness to the specific qualities of appearance of phenomena is required. Operating like a hinge between the two attitudes is Banks' declared preference for the natural arch over the man-made arch. It signals the eighteenth century fascination with natural curiosities and the desire to locate a natural or primitive origin for architecture. The idea of nature and the primitive are interwoven during the eighteenth century in Europe. The enlightenment project proceeded from the classification of natural forms to the classification of human behavior. The terminology used to describe natural forms on occasion slips into the language used to describe non-Western people. The result of this blurring is that descriptions of natural phenomena can start to read emblematically. Banks' description of the natural arch as "noble" resonates with the eighteenth century convention of the noble savage.

### **Rykwert on the natural source of architecture**

In *On Adam's House in Paradise*, Joseph Rykwert discusses the ambivalence to a natural origin of architecture that developed during the eighteenth century in Europe. The competing theories regarding the role of nature, and by extension the primitive in architecture, manifest in the ambivalence expressed in the descriptions of the New Zealand landscape and native population by the early explorers. Rykwert provides several examples of advocates and adversaries of a natural or primitive origin of architecture. The description by Ribart de Chamoussé of the natural chamber he stumbles across in the woods on his estate, resonates with Banks' description of the natural arches located in New Zealand (Rykwert 1981: 80). Helpfully, Ribart provides an expedient example of the relationship to nature, informed by theorists such as Laugier and Rousseau.

Ribart argued that for architects to be successful in competing with "the Greeks, they should *not imitate them closely, but go right back to the primitive theory, which is Nature herself*" [our emphasis]. Rykwert summarises Ribart's account of forming a small hall from the modification of a fortuitous grouping of trees within the woods on his estate. The young trees were grouped in threes, arranged triangularly to form "a natural chamber" (1981: 80). Ribart's account weaves together a natural origin with a Greek origin for architecture, stating:

I almost imitated the ancient people of Achaia, in their composition of the Doric [order]. I had the trees of the chamber cut just above where they branched out ... and all at the same height. I had the distance between them spanned by wall plates or lintels, then had beams placed above that, then a ceiling and a roof, and so I rediscovered the Greek type, but under a new species and with considerable differences. (Rykwert 1981: 80)

Rykwert noted that for Ribart the order was something that he encountered rather than devised: the order was somehow implicit in nature.

Writing in 1797 and 1813, Sir James Hall illustrated his attempt to locate a natural origin for architecture. Hall attempted to prove his hypothesis that Gothic architecture was imitative of timber huts by constructing Gothic building elements out of willow rods. He hoped to prove that the ornament and forms created out of stone in Gothic buildings were imitative of an earlier model of timber building rather than the result of the arbitrary molding of form. By establishing a clear mimetic logic for Gothic buildings, he hoped to raise the esteem for Gothic buildings within the general populace (Rykwert 1981: 82-87).

Rykwert provided examples to illustrate the argument, countering the positive reading of a natural or "primitive" origin for architecture, suggesting:

Schlegel condemns the attempts to find the original forms of Greek architecture in such 'rude contrivances, suggested by the *necessities of savage life*'; he finds the analogy between such a theory of Gothic origins and an equally unproven theory about Greek architecture gratuitous. Romanesque architecture, he further points out, shows no traces of its origins in wickerwork or suchlike. Gothic architecture develops from early Christian and Romanesque, by the operation of the Gothic spirit. (1981: 87, our emphasis)

The conflicting meaning of the concept of the primitive presents itself in the shift in terminology used by Ribart in relationship to Schlegel. Ribart romanticises the primitive by theorising it as a state aligned with a natural order. Schlegel demonises the primitive through his phrase, "savage life". The primitive shifts from a category or state aligned with an essence beyond art, in Ribart's commentary, to a condition of debasement in Schlegel's. Schlegel exorcises the primitive: he distances it from an origin of architecture. It was this flickering of meaning between primitive and savage that informed the intellectual framework and image repertoire of explorers such as Banks.

Banks' attraction towards the natural arch relates most strongly to the version of the primitive established by theorists such as Laugier and Rousseau. The recourse to the illusions of the ideal and picturesque landscape romanticises the notion of the primitive. The description of the natural arch as noble is indicative of the representational mechanisms utilised by the explorer/colonist to psychologically alleviate the threat of the native population. The primitive subject is woven metonymically into the noble arch as an image of a natural origin for architecture. Within his essay "Notes for an Alternative History of the Primitive Hut", Stephen Cairns argued that Laugier's primitive hut "is a theoretical deduction predicated upon a generalised figure of 'man' who, 'by imitating the natural process', comes to discover the correct and proper principles of architecture" (2006: 92). He argued that Laugier's hut is not formed by empirical observation

of either primitive people or their building practices. As Vidler noted, Laugier represses any explicit connection between architectural form and a specific culture. Rather, he favours the formation of a universal form which transcends culture (1987: 20). In these terms, the primitive hut becomes another instance of the attempt to universalise Western culture through the strategic use of the image of the primitive. Cairns describes this process of establishing an essence of architectural form in terms of the domestication of the primitive. The negative and threatening dimension of the primitive are eliminated in the transformation of the primitive into universal man.

### **Ambivalence and the primitive**

In his 1835 posthumous text, *An Historical Essay on Architecture*, Thomas Hope wrote that the purpose of shelter was to provide comfort, security and space for possessions. He continued that it was developed with respect to climate, materials, and the influence of soil and atmosphere. He perceived shelter to be an indigenous response to needs, and to the opportunities available to meet those needs. He further observed that however primitive and simple different people were, their buildings would “offer a distinctive form and character, evidently suited to these contingencies, and different from the architecture of other nations not similarly situated” (1835: 2). He discussed and appraised architectural development chronologically from antiquity to the Greek Revival. In his introduction, Hope made early mention of Māori houses. (It is probably the first mention of Māori in an architectural publication.) He wrote:

The savage, on the shores of New Zealand, possessed of no goods; indifferent to wife and children; with no care beyond that for his own hideous person, and for that person merely requiring, during the hours of repose, shelter against the fury of the blast or of the bird of prey, digs in the sand, for his living body, a hole little larger than that which he might require for his grave. (1835: 2)

By locating extreme depravity in the part of the world that was farthest from Britain, Hope’s observation implied that Britain was farthest from such depravity. His description of the home of the New Zealander was unusual and inaccurate and it appears that he conflated reports of architecture in different parts of the South Seas – possibly Australia. His account runs counter to a positive reading of a natural or “primitive” origin for architecture. Hope’s description of the Māori house was far more degraded than other early nineteenth century writers, such as J.L. Nicholas and R.A. Cruise, described in the 1810s and 1820s. Even earlier, Hawkesworth had quoted Banks on the houses of Māori, writing:

Their houses are certainly the most inartificially made of any thing among them, scarce equal to a European dog-kennel and resembling one in the door at least which is barely high and wide enough to admit a man crawling on all fours. (1773: III. 54)

Banks described how over the door, or in the house, a plank was fixed “cover’d” with their carving (carving for Banks was applied). This Māori call a pare. Banks wrote that Māori valued this “much as we do a picture, placing it always as conspicuously as possible” (1962: I.17). Finding equivalence between the homes of Māori and those of animals implicitly equated the two and served to debase, rather than elevate, the New Zealander.

Banks' positive reading of natural architecture of the sublime geological formations that has been discussed earlier is here countered by his negative descriptions of Māori buildings, as noted above: "Their houses are the most inartificially made of any thing among them". Within Banks' writing, then, we can find both positive and negative readings of the natural and primitive. The alignment of the primitive with nature is, however, twisted to justify a negative response to Māori architecture. The eighteenth century fascination for natural arches lay, in part, in their potential to help establish a natural origin for architecture. The emblematic role of the natural arch was to provide an example of the elemental components within architectural construction. The rhetorical figure of the arch was deformed by its deployment by Māori within a defensive military strategy. The gaps between Cook's and Banks' descriptions of the natural arch provide useful insights into the complex processes involved within the early explorers' attempts to comprehend the newly discovered lands of the Pacific. Banks' privileging of the aesthetic value of the arch ignores the cultural and pragmatic value of landscape to Māori that Cook observed. Cultural constructs such as the natural and the primitive were tested and reformed through their transportation to such new contexts.

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