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The mystery of the Moscow *ki'i*

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The old building of Moscow University is situated in the heart of Moscow, just across the road from Red Square and the Kremlin. Now it is occupied by the Museum of Anthropology. Its rich collections, stored in the eighteenth-century cellars, have been inaccessible to researchers for decades because of the renovation of the building, but recently, since the museum's energetic director Professor Aleksandra Buzhilova has managed to obtain finances for new shelving, the old coffers and trunks are gradually revealing their treasures.

One of them is a Hawaiian *ki'i* (item no. 372/20), a large anthropomorphic sculpture carved out of volcanic lava with a Janus-faced head. The 'front' side represents a rather rough and sketchy face with the eyes closed, the left arm bent and the right stretched along the body. The similarly rough head at the 'back' side of the sculpture has asymmetrical opened eyes, a bent right hand and a hardly distinguishable left one. The lower part of the body is not carved (Figures 5.1 and 5.2). At the bottom of the figure is an inscription in black reading 'Hawaii' and digits that look like '180 [...]'. The front side also features an old glued museum label, although the inscription on it is completely erased. The back side has an unreadable inscription in black ink. The inscription 'Lava' is on the side of the sculpture and 'Hawaii' is on the base. The height of the figure is 41 cm, the width at the shoulders is 24 cm, and the depth is 9 cm.



Figure 5.1. Hawaiian *ki'i* (front side).

Source: Photo by Museum of Anthropology, Moscow State University.



Figure 5.2. Hawaiian *ki'i* (back side).

Source: Photo by Museum of Anthropology, Moscow State University.

The collections of the Museum of Anthropology, which have survived revolutions, wars and numerous relocations and transfers, and the story of which has been described by the present authors elsewhere (Balakhonova 2012:179–201; Govor 2018:184–187), are often lacking detailed documentation and are hardly known to scholars outside Moscow University. The large stone *ki'i* attracted our attention because it was catalogued in the old collection No. 372, which includes a number of artefacts collected by Urey Lisiansky, a member of the first Russian round-the-world expedition, who visited the Hawai'i Islands in 1804. Lisiansky was interested in ancient Hawaiian culture, and his collection included, for instance, the frame of a feather god (*aumakua hulumanu*), which Lisiansky described as 'field [campaign] idol, plaited from tree roots' (Lisianskii 1812:plate II). The inventory of collection 372 compiled in the 1960s listed the stone *ki'i* in question next to the *aumakua hulumanu* (372/20 and 372/19, respectively), but its belonging to Lisiansky's collection raised some questions. While Lisiansky depicted most of his Hawaiian artefacts on the plates in his atlas (Lisianskii 1812), the stone figure was absent. Moreover, inscriptions on the stone made in Latin letters hinted to some process of cataloguing the figure by a foreign museum or a trader.



Figure 5.3. Vladimir Sviatlovsky. Image is in public domain, created in the 1900s.

Source: Unknown creator, image from Wikimedia Commons (commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Svyatlovskiy.jpg).

A search in the South Pacific holdings of other Russian collections revealed that the Museum of Anthropology and Ethnography (Kunstkamera) in St Petersburg has two stone figures (1314-1 and 1314-2) from Hawai'i of a similar type, but these figures are not Janus-faced like the Moscow *ki'i*, and are of a smaller size (33 and 22 cm). The figures originated from a collection acquired by Vladimir Sviatlovsky (Sviatlovsky), professor of political economy at St Petersburg University (Figure 5.3), who visited Hawai'i in 1908 and, according to Kunstkamera curator Iulia Likhtenberg's publication, are copies of Bishop Museum holdings, although she does not provide any further information about similar artefacts in the Bishop Museum (Likhtenberg 1960:191–192, 205).

Sviatlovsky's visit to Hawai'i provoked a lot of local interest. Newspapers reported that the catalyst for his trip was the 'discovery' in St Petersburg of 'Hawaiian feather-work, which was given by one of the Hawaiian chiefs to Captain Cook [...] the day before he was killed'. Moreover, while in Hawai'i, Sviatlovsky proposed to the trustees of the Bishop Museum an exchange of Russian duplicates from Cook's collection for some artefacts representing the everyday life of Hawaiian Islanders (*Argus* 1908; *Hawaiian Gazette* 1908; *The Pacific Commercial Advertiser* 1908). The plan was gladly agreed upon, but was most likely never implemented. Nevertheless, Sviatlovsky managed to acquire a fairly representative collection of Hawaiian artefacts via William Brigham, the curator of the Bishop Museum, who provided him with access to its duplicate collections; he also purchased some artefacts from traders, particularly the James Steiner Island Curio Company (*The Honolulu Advertiser* 1908; Rozina 1974). Nevertheless, the similarity of the Moscow *ki'i* with the Kunstkamera figures does not testify to its origin from Sviatlovsky's

collection. It seems dubious that the superlative Janus-faced figure would have ended up in Moscow, while the *Kunstkamera*, for which he acquired artefacts especially, would have received the less elaborate figures.

A clue to the Moscow *ki'i*'s origin came when we examined it more closely in the context of the history of the Moscow collections. The figure had a barely noticeable label glued to its surface. In the archive of Nina Smirnova, who was the curator of the ethnographical holdings at the museum from 1940 to 1984, we found a reference that such labels came from the collection of 'A.A. Korsini', which was deposited into the Museum of Anthropology presumably in the 1910s. The early inventory of this collection lists around 1,000 objects from all over the world, including some from the South Pacific, although some of these objects are now missing. Our stone *ki'i* is unfortunately not mentioned in the early inventory and lacks any documentation. We might only suppose that this stunning figure was a personal gift from Korsini to the museum director Dmitry Anuchin and thus has not been properly catalogued, although it had a 'Korsini' label.

If our informed guess is correct, this is a good example of how interest in 'primitive' cultures supported the search for artefacts as far as Oceania in pre-revolutionary Russia. Although Moscow at that time was not the capital of Russia and did not enjoy such financial support as the St Petersburg Academy of Sciences and the *Kunstkamera*, interest in the prehistory of humankind thrived there due to the learned societies enjoying broad support and interest from the wider community. Initially the activities of natural science enthusiasts there centred around the Imperial Moscow Society of Naturalists, established in 1805 at Moscow University with a predominantly academic membership. The situation changed in the liberal 1860s – in 1863 a new Society of Devotees of Natural Science was established, with a membership including scientists and professors but also educated laymen. It later grew into the Imperial Society of Devotees of Natural Science, Anthropology and Ethnography. In 1879 Dmitry Anuchin (1843–1923), a member of this society, and his colleagues organised an international Anthropological Exhibition in Moscow, establishing numerous contacts with European savants, museums and societies.

Anuchin, the heart and soul of the Moscow School studies, was a naturalist and geographer with wide-ranging interests (Figure 5.4). Since the 1870s he had dedicated himself to the complex study of humankind, developing a concept of unity of three sciences – archaeology, physical anthropology and ethnography – and aiming to reconstruct the ethnogenetic and

ethnohistorical development of humankind. He was an adherent of the evolutionist-typological theory developed in the West by Herbert Spencer and Edward Burnett Tylor. They considered that the evolution of objects of material culture reflected the development of ideas and thoughts of human society, and therefore that archaeology, physical anthropology and ethnography should be inextricably linked both in museum exhibitions and in teaching. These ideas guided Anuchin when he established the Anthropological Museum in Moscow in 1883, in the wake of the Anthropological Exhibition of 1879 (Balakhonova 2012).



Figure 5.4. Dmitry Anuchin. Image is in public domain, created in 1882.

Source: Balakhonova (2013:9).

Archaeology played an important role in Anuchin's 'triad', as it was known in Russia, and Anuchin and his followers developed an 'anthropological approach' to archaeology (Platonova 2010:294, 303). A specialised Archaeological Society was established in Moscow in 1864 and Anuchin took an active role in the work. Although at the turn of the nineteenth century Russian archaeological research was concerned almost exclusively with the territory of the Russian Empire, scholars such as Anuchin always aimed towards a broader perspective and were interested in comparative materials from other regions. For instance, the earliest museum inventories filled in by Anuchin's hand indicate that he actively sought out artefacts from Australia and Oceania, acquiring them from various museums and traders such as Oldman, Umlauff and Poehl. His enthusiasm for the study of mankind, including prehistory and archaeology, was also supported by the Russian *intelligentsia*, the cultured strata of society. When travelling overseas, many of them, although not anthropologists, were in correspondence with Anuchin and would acquire artefacts for the museum.



Figure 5.5. Alexandra Corsini (left) visiting Leo Tolstoy and his wife, 1909.

Source: © Leo Tolstoy State Museum, Moscow, Russia.

Alexandra Corsini (spelled ‘Korsini’ in Russian) was among these people. Of Italian origin, born about 1865 in Warsaw, in Russian Poland, she ‘knew five languages since childhood, learning later on three more’ (Popov 1910). By the turn of the century she was living in Moscow teaching geography in high schools. Her aspiration was to travel the world, to become acquainted with the culture of different societies. The opportunity emerged when her younger friend Nathalie Roudakoff (Rudakov), a woman from the family of a well-off Moscow merchant, offered to pay for their joint trip to the ‘Orient’. They included in their team a photographer, Alexander Efimoff, and in 1905–09 visited many countries in Africa, Asia, America and the South Pacific. In the course of their Oceanian voyage in 1907 they visited Australia, Tasmania, New Zealand, Fiji, and Honolulu in Hawai‘i. In all these places Corsini collected artefacts, made photographs and recorded local mythology. These materials were later used at her numerous public lectures illustrated with ‘magic lantern’ slides in the Historical Museum in

Moscow and other venues. In 1909 she was invited to meet Leo Tolstoy, who, with great interest, listened to her accounts of her travels in India and encounters with people there (Figure 5.5). Later he wrote to Corsini:

You know my opinion about the importance and benefit for the working people, who have no opportunity to learn these things from books, to learn about the life, customs, and especially the religious beliefs of other nations. When this information is transmitted through such beautiful magic lantern images as you provide, and with the interesting explanations with which you accompany them, the information is easily digested and easily remembered, and therefore I fully sympathize with your activity and wish it the greatest dissemination and accessibility among the people. (Tolstoy 1955:134)

The rich collections of Alexandra Corsini survived in the Museum of Anthropology in Moscow, but the materials of her lectures have never been published. After the revolution she stayed for several years in revolutionary Russia, working in the Museum of Country Studies of the Moscow Archaeological Institute, but later had to emigrate to France.

The stone figure of the *ki'i*, acquired by Corsini in Hawai'i probably from a dealer, is an interesting artefact, the origin of which so far remains a mystery. Hawaiians have an ancient tradition of the sculptural representation of their gods or deified ancestors; these sculptures were made mostly from wood. Huc M. Luquiens noted about Hawaiian stone carving:

The Hawaiians made a great number of stone tools and utensils, but did little successful carving in that medium. They were not naturally sculptors in stone. On occasion, a Hawaiian found a rock which resembled a man or an animal; with a little chipping he added to the resemblance and set the image up as a god.

He further noted that stone carving had some development at Necker Island, which had no wood for carving, and 'these idols are amusing little figures, very interesting, though crude' (Handy 1965:231–232).

The style of the Moscow Janus-faced *ki'i* with its small eyes, schematic mouth and bas-relief arms is markedly different from the common Hawaiian/Polynesian-style *ki'i* or *tiki* with 'large almond-shaped eyes, exaggerated mouths, and stance of bent knees in a wrestler's pose' (Keala 2017:4). Although a search through museum collections and

publications available online did not result in any other Hawaiian Janus-faced anthropomorphic stone figures having a marked similarity with the Moscow *ki'i*, several figures with similar stylistic features have been identified. Marques Hanalei Marzan, the cultural adviser of the Bishop Museum, kindly informed us: ‘We have at least two small examples in our collection that have similar characteristics (facial features, arm across body, square body without legs) to this image, but seem to be of later manufacture’ and do not ‘have a double sided carving’ (Marques Hanalei Marzan pers. comm. 2019). The Musée du quai Branly in Paris also has several anthropomorphic Hawaiian sculptures with stylistic similarities to the Moscow *ki'i*. Previously these were part of the collection of the Musée de l’Homme. One of them is bicephalic (71.1939.21.1.1-2 D) and there is no information about its donor; two others (71.1879.10.1 and 71.1879.10.2) were donated by Pierre Étienne Théodore Ballieu (1828–85), who was the French consul in Hawai‘i from 1869 to 1878 and collected Hawaiian artefacts (Parker 2018:1–2, 94, 135).

Original figures of Hawaiian deities are not numerous. According to Michael Gunn’s study:

About 250 idols of feather, wood or stone survive in public collections, with others in private hands. This is just a small proportion of the idols that existed before the iconoclasm of 1819, though the exact number before that date is not known. (Gunn 2014:153)

It would be tempting to celebrate the Moscow *ki'i* as a unique early Hawaiian stone sculpture, but this scenario appears too good to be true. It is necessary to take into account that both Corsini and Svatlovsky made their acquisitions of ‘gods’ in 1907–08, when interest in traditional Hawaiian culture was reviving, which inevitably led to the commercialisation of its trade and, possibly, counterfeit production. Until further studies are carried out, we cannot exclude the possibility that the Moscow *ki'i* was a copy of an artefact, rather than an original excavated stone.

Still, whatever further research will show, the Moscow *ki'i* has earned its right to be cherished and respected as a powerful object with *mana*. As J.S. Emerson, cited by Michael Gunn, said in 1892: ‘The god does not make the *kahuna* (priest), but the *kahuna* often makes his god’ (Emerson 1892:4). The Moscow *ki'i*, collected with love and devotion by the Russian woman geographer Alexandra Corsini and brought to faraway Moscow, then becoming a companion to Dmitry Anuchin through the

grim Russian revolutionary years, civil war and famine until his premature death in 1923, has gained its own *mana* – *mana* to build the bridges of understanding and respect between peoples.

It did not prove possible to mount an exhibition of objects highlighted in this chapter at the Museum of Anthropology, Moscow State University.

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