

## **Tupaia – a man of culture**

Born into a leading family of Raiatea in the Society Islands, Tupaia undertook training to become a *tahua*, or priest, specialising in star navigation. As a result of warfare in the late 1750s, he fled to nearby Tahiti where he rose to the position of high priest.

When Cook and his crew arrived in Tahiti, Tupaia established cordial relations with the Europeans, and sailed with his assistant Tarheto/Taiata on the *Endeavour* in July 1769.

A man of culture, Tupaia instructed his new friends in the islands' traditions and completed drawings to illustrate his narratives. During the *Endeavour's* time in New Zealand Tupaia's ability to converse with the Māori smoothed the way for Cook and his men.

Linguistic and cultural barriers prevented Tupaia from mediating between the Aboriginal people and the Europeans. Sadly, he died in Batavia in November 1770.

## Tupaia – a man of culture

Described as ‘tall, handsome, strong, athletic and extraordinarily intelligent’ by his biographer, Tupaia (or Tupia), was born into one of the leading families of Raiatea, in the Society Islands. He undertook training and became a *tahua*, or priest, who specialised in star navigation. As a result of warfare on his island home in the late 1750s, he fled to nearby Tahiti where he rose to the position of high priest.

Tupaia first made the acquaintance of Europeans in 1767 when Samuel Wallis, commander of the British frigate *Dolphin*, ‘discovered’ Tahiti during his search in the Pacific for the ‘Great South Land’. Two years later the *Endeavour* brought another party of Europeans to Tahiti with whom Tupaia established cordial relations. As a result – and at Banks’ invitation – he sailed away from Tahiti, along with his young assistant Tarheto/Taiata, on the *Endeavour* in July 1769.

A man of culture, Tupaia not only instructed his new friends in the traditions of the islands but also completed drawings to illustrate his narratives. He also created what has been described as ‘an iconic map of the Pacific ... demonstrating Polynesian wayfinders’ vast knowledge of the ocean’.<sup>1</sup> During the *Endeavour*’s time in New Zealand Tupaia’s ability to converse with the Māori often smoothed the way for Cook and his men.

Linguistic and cultural barriers meant that Tupaia was unable to be a mediator between the Aboriginal people and the Europeans. Sadly, like many of those on board, he did not survive the stopover in Batavia where he died on 11 November 1770; Tarheto had died two days earlier.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/6t2/tupaia> accessed 23 September 2019.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Druett, *Tupaia: the remarkable story of Captain Cook’s Polynesian navigator*, Auckland, Random House, 2011.