



2.4 Introduction to Pacific Collections: Material Culture of Kiribati



The following summary provides an overview of material you are likely to come across in Scottish collections. These are written according to island region.

Republic of Kiribati

Kiribati (pronounced *kiribas*) is a series of around thirty-two atolls and a raised coral island located in the cultural area of Micronesia. It is officially known as the Independent and Sovereign Republic of Kiribati. Twenty-one islands are inhabited, the most populated of which is Tarawa and early settlement took place around 2,000 years ago.

European contact with the islands is recorded in 1521 when Spanish explorer Ferdinand Magellan charted Flint Island. In 1606 the Portuguese Captain Pedro Fernandes de Queirós, leading a Spanish expedition, sighted the northern islands of the group. In 1764 Captain John Byron passed through the area during his circumnavigation of the globe on HMS *Dolphin*. In the 1820s the main island chain was named the Gilbert Islands by the French after Thomas Gilbert, a British naval captain who navigated the archipelago in 1788. Throughout most of the 19th century English speakers referred to the group as the Kingsmill Islands. These geographical names appear in collections documentation. A British protectorate was proclaimed over the Gilbert and Ellice Islands in 1892. The whole area gained independence in 1971 and in 1975 split to form two separate countries: Kiribati and Tuvalu. Kiribati is understood to be a local pronunciation of the word 'Gilbert'.

Today a number of islands in Kiribati are threatened by rising sea levels and the government has even purchased land in Fiji for people who may be displaced by the disappearance of their home.

Shark tooth weapons

The most common artefacts from Kiribati in Scottish museums are shark tooth weapons. These can take the form of swords or shorter daggers consisting of a wooden blade and handle with multiple shark teeth lashed in rows on either edge. There is often a wrist strap of coconut fibre and a piece of fish skin wrapped around the handle. The same method of attaching shark teeth to a wooden blade is used for longer spears which usually have additional prongs attached with coconut fibre. These prongs sometimes come detached. Modern examples from the early 20th century onwards tend to be smaller and lighter, sometimes with a binding of woven leaves dyed in bright colours, reflecting their use for trade and decorative purposes rather than for fighting.



Sword with blade of shark teeth,
Kiribati, *National Museums
Scotland (A.1905.197)*

Coconut fibre armour

A distinctive type of body armour made of coconut fibre comes from Kiribati but is less commonly found in museum collections. A full suit of armour consists of an undergarment of tightly woven fibres covering the legs, torso and arms, an outer rigid vest or cuirass of finer fibres, and a rigid attachment for the back which protrudes above the top of the wearer's head. It was previously understood that the tall projection shielded the wearer's neck while standing at the front line of battle from missiles thrown by allies standing behind. However, the cumbersome nature of these suits has led to the theory that they were more likely worn by people of status positioned at the back during battle. The cuirass and back piece is often decorated with a geometric pattern created using dark brown fibre usually given as being from human hair. Glasgow Museums and National Museums Scotland each have a complete set of armour. Glasgow Museums also have a helmet formed from a puffer fish.



Complete body armour of coconut fibre and shark tooth spear and sword, Kiribati, *National Museums Scotland (A.1899.251)*

Fish hook

A distinctive composite fish hook exists that is formed of yellow coloured stalactite originating from a specific cave on the island of Banaba to the east of the main chain of islands of Kiribati. Banaba's alternative name is Ocean Island. The stalactite is worked into a cylindrical form with flattened ends. The barb is always made of bone and both pieces are bound together using plant fibre, the end of which is left to hang loose forming a frayed lure.



Fish hook, Banaba Island, Kiribati, Kiribati, *National Museum Scotland (A.UC.536)*

Further Reading:

Bataua, BT (1985), *Kiribati: a changing atoll culture*. Suva: Institute of Pacific Studies of University of the South Pacific

Grimble, A (1952), *A pattern of islands*. London: John Murray

Koch, G (1986), *Material culture of kiribati*. [Translation of *Materielle Kultur der Gilbert-Inseln*, 1965] Suva: University of the South Pacific