



1. Frontal view of the board © Sotheby's

### Wooden votive board Papuan Gulf, Wápo Region Papua New Guinea

Collected in situ in 1930 by Paul Wirz  
Oval board of light wood with areas of white, red and black colouring  
102cm (height) x approx. 26cm (width)



## Votive Board Papua New Guinea

### Provenance

Andreas Schlothauer, from 2002  
Joris Visser Gallery, Brussels  
Collected in situ in 1930 by Paul Wirz (1892-1955)

Published in: Wirz, Paul. 1934. "Beiträge zur Ethnographie des Papua-Golfes, Britisch-Neuguinea". In *Abhandlungen und Berichte der Museen für Tierkunde und Völkerkunde zu Dresden*, Vol 19/2. Leipzig: Table XXI, Pic. 10

### Brief description

Paddle-shaped board made of light brown wood with various areas coloured white, red and black. Papuan Gulf, Wápo region (Papua New Guinea)  
Size: approx. 102cm long, approx. 26cm wide

### Local name

gópe or kwoi (kwé)<sup>1</sup>

### DESCRIPTION

#### Object

Made of hard light wood, the light brown coloured board is somewhat over 1m long and about 26 cm wide. The back and the rim of the front are in black. The front is divided into white, black and, exceptionally, two red areas.<sup>2</sup> Three motifs are depicted in bas-relief: in the upper third an abstract face resembling a mask, below it a V-shaped form and, in the lowest section, a complex ornamental motif. The thin nose is the only thing that protrudes significantly. The forehead, some peripheries and the narrow black strips - which serve to delimit the red and white ornamental areas that are more deeply carved out - are on one and the same level. Each red circular eye has a narrow white area around it that ends well below the chin. The mouth is white and similarly V-shaped.



2. Detail of the Face

In the middle of the board, the V-shaped motif separates the face from the more ornamental section below it, a kind of body, depicted in a manner that is very rarely found in other pieces. Around a small circle, probably a symbolic naval, there is an eight-limbed motif, whose four longest limbs resemble hooves. Here too, remains of white colouring suggest that this ornament was originally completely white.



3. Detail of the central area and ornament

The board and its motifs have been carefully and evenly carved. Its creator used sharp tools and was an experienced wood sculptor.<sup>3</sup>

In the upper central forehead region there is a hole, about 0.5cm wide. In the V-shaped motif there are three small holes, whose purpose is unclear. One is in the middle above the others. Of the latter, below it, one is on the right and one on the left.

#### Remains of labels

On the back of the board one can distinguish two labels and the remains of a third. Roughly in the middle of the board there are the remains of a serrated label, which may possibly have been a Swiss customs stamp. In the upper part there is a small square label hanging on an iron hook, with the handwritten number “3358” in blue. A long thin white label

has been stuck to the board about 10cm above this, stating in typed script: “Pic.10= Gope from the Wapo region (Wirz)”.



4. Remains of labels

On the back of the board it says in blue writing “Aird”. On the front, in the red area below the V-shaped motif, it also says “Aird-D”, as well as “gope”. Similar inscriptions can be found on other gópe boards collected by Wirz, e.g. Number 12083 (Völkerkundemuseum, Burgdorf).<sup>4</sup>

#### PROVENANCE

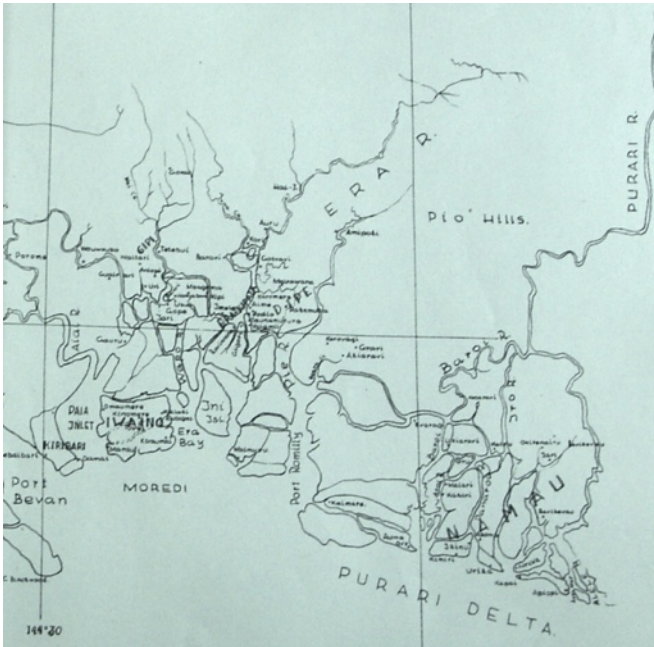
##### Papuan Gulf, Purari Delta and Wapó-Erá Region

The Papuan Gulf is a roughly 400 km wide region on the south coast of Papua New Guinea. The Purari River and its estuaries form a delta approximately 1,300 km<sup>2</sup> in size, the major part of which is swampland prone to flooding. According to Williams, 8,688 people sharing a common language lived here in 1917 (Williams 1924: 4). From 1883 to 1906 it was a colony in the British Empire (British New Guinea) and subsequently it became the Territory of Papua, under Australian administration. A few dozen kilometers into the interior lies the Wapó Erá Region, whose typical characteristics are described by the Swiss ethnologue Paul Wirz as follows:

##### “3. The Wapó-Erá Region

*To the east of the Kiko River there begins a province with a different style, which finds expression above all in its carved gópe shields (...). In its ornamentation there is a marked tendency for the individual parts to break apart and, mostly, no longer show any connection to one another. Although it is still always based on the human form, this appears to have dissolved into its constituent parts. The various parts of the body, such as head, arms, legs and torso, seem to have no connection to each other anymore. Instead they constitute independent ornamental motifs and we can clearly see, when we compare different objects, how these separate body parts are transformed into curves, spirals, etc. Frequently there are star-shaped or clover-like ornaments. Or there may be a halo around the head (...). The shape of the shield also undergoes all sorts of variations (...). The largest object in the collection from the Erá region is 2m long. However, most are only 1m long or less. In certain regions, e.g. in Têtehui village, a type of bark is often used to make the shields. But this is less durable and means the object won't last long (Pic. 8-21, Table XXI)” (Wirz 1934: 90).*





5. Paul Wirz' map

### Paul Wirz in the Papuan Gulf

Paul Wirz, one of the most important Swiss ethnologists, was born on 29th May 1892 in Moscow. He studied engineering at Zurich Technical College (ETH) from winter 1910 to 1914 but failed to pass the final exam. As he was financially secure thanks to his inheritance following the death of his father, he was able to begin a second course of studies in anthropology, geography, ethnology and zoology at Zurich University in winter 1914. His first field trip, 1915-1919, took him to Dutch New Guinea. In 1930 Wirz was in Papua New Guinea again from the end of February. From his base in Kikori he twice visited the eastern part of the Papuan Gulf for several weeks. These trips are well-documented in a publication (Wirz 1934). However, there are no further precisions as to the villages in which he acquired the respective objects.



6. Paul Wirz in the Papuan Gulf (1930)

### USAGE

Votive boards were kept in men's houses and each one was always the property of an individual man. According to Paul Wirz: "Each man possesses several of these boards. Youths inherit them from their fathers and, later, make them themselves. Then there is another category of boards, which are much larger and more carefully finished. Each men's house has just one of these" (Wirz 1934: 10). As to their usage, Wirz remarks: "These boards have often been written about. Nevertheless, they must be categorised along with other more or less mysterious objects from the clan houses, about whose true meaning we

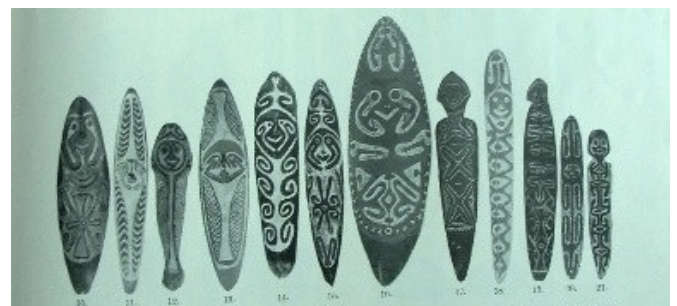
really know very little. Some have seen in them a special sort of ancestor imagery. Others have claimed they commemorate specific events and celebrities. But these people have missed the fact that they are primarily objects possessing a high degree of magic power, only needing to be present to be effective, and exercising a positive influence over the owner by this power alone. Objects with very similar powers are, after all, familiar to us from other regions of Papua New Guinea. I only need to mention here the *churinga*-like magic stones from Dutch New Guinea, or the *losanges*, which are often so large and heavy that they can't be used for spinning at all, but simply have magic potency. Therefore, the *gópe* or *kavó* can also be seen as large losanges, but with a very special significance" (Wirz 1934: 87f). As Newton also states, unfortunately we know very little about how they were produced or about their creators (Newton 1961: 29)<sup>6</sup>. Most writers assume they were used in the ancestor cult. The boards were often displayed next to reliquaries. Smaller boards were also used in dances.



7. Men's house, photo by Paul Wirz, 1930 (in Hamson 2010: 13)

### COMPARABLE PIECES

In Wirz 1934 there are photos of five *gópe* boards from the Wápo Region (see pic. 8, left). But none is similar to this one. A board whose upper third part is similarly constructed can be seen in a field photo by Wirz (pic. 7).



8. Gópe boards (in Wirz 1934: Table XXI)

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**Translation :** Thomas Hawes

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Douglas Newton's overview of the various indigenous names for the votive boards of the Papuan Gulf (Newton 1961: 36).
- <sup>2</sup> Newton cites white lime, red ochre and black charcoal. "Paint is laid on with a frayed pandanus branch; it usually consists of lime for white, red ochre, and charcoal for black" (Newton 1961: 29).
- <sup>3</sup> Newton mentions cutting tools made from stones and sea shells. "Carving tools are limited (...) to stone adzes and axes for rough work, and shell scrapers for finishing" (Newton 1961: 29).
- <sup>4</sup> In Burgdorf this piece was re-inventoried in the 1960s. Thus it has not yet been attributed to the collector Paul Wirz.
- <sup>5</sup> The summary is based on the book by Andrea E. Schmidt on Paul Wirz (Schmidt 1998: 106 ff).
- <sup>6</sup> *"Regrettably little is recorded about the making of the ritual objects, or their prescribed makers".*

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