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Hongi Hika: Warrior chief

The Ngāpuhi chief Hongi Hika is usually seen as responsible for beginning the Musket Wars. An important influence on Hongi's leadership was the defeat of Ngāpuhi by Ngāti Whātua in the battle of Moremonui at Maunganui Bluff, Northland in 1807 or 1808. Though some Ngāpuhi were armed with muskets, they were successfully ambushed by Ngāti Whātua using traditional hand-held weapons who took advantage of the time it took to reload muskets. Hongi survived by hiding in a swamp, but his uncle and two brothers were killed. Hongi felt obliged to avenge this defeat. By 1815 he was the undisputed leader of his people and convinced of the shock value of muskets used in sufficient numbers.

Hongi made contact with European visitors to the Bay of Islands and in 1814 ventured to Sydney. Here he met Samuel Marsden of the Church Missionary Society, whom he encouraged to go ahead with his plan to establish a mission at the Bay of Islands. This was set up later that year under Hongi's protection. European ships now came to the Bay of Islands in greater numbers. Hongi guaranteed their safety, greatly increasing his opportunities to exchange food and supplies for European technology, including tools and weapons. Other mission stations were established under his protection at Kerikeri and Waimate.

The leaders of other iwi and hapū complained to Marsden about Hongi's monopoly of the relationship with the missionaries. For his part, Hongi was angry that the missionaries refused to trade in muskets and powder. But he made the most of the iron tools and agricultural implements they were willing to trade.

Hongi put the many slaves captured on southern campaigns from 1818 to work increasing the yield from his land. While he experimented with wheat and corn, his main concern was to ensure that large quantities of potatoes and flax were grown to exchange for muskets and powder with the crews of visiting ships. Muskets didn't come cheap, and some Māori starved while pork and potatoes were sold to visiting Europeans.

As he acquired guns Hongi set about seeking utu (revenge) from Ngāti Whātua for the Moremonui disaster. In 1818 he headed further south, leading a taua that destroyed 50 villages as far away as Hanga Bay on the East Coast. Some 2000 slaves were taken so that

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they could be put to work dressing flax to exchange for muskets. In 1821 Hongi attacked rivals in the Auckland–Coromandel region, capturing another 2000 forced labourers.

In 1820 Hongi and the young chief Waikato accompanied the missionary Thomas Kendall to Cambridge, England to assist with the compilation of a Māori dictionary. Hongi was more interested in getting his hands on some of the ‘thousand thousand guns’ he had heard were stored in the Tower of London.

Hongi met King George IV and was presented with gifts, including a suit of armour. Hongi traded most of his gifts in Sydney on the way home for 300 muskets, but kept the ‘coat of mail’. This saved his life during a battle with Ngāti Pāoa at Mauinaina, beside the Tāmaki River, in which he was hit twice by musket shots. His survival gained him a reputation for invulnerability.

This boost to Hongi’s arsenal not only altered the balance of power in the north, but prompted an arms race that would have consequences for decades to come.

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