

# France votes to return Maori heads to New Zealand



Maori tattoos are a sign of courage and strength

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## **The French parliament has voted to return the mummified heads of at least 15 Maori warriors to New Zealand.**

The heads, taken by European explorers in the 18th and 19th centuries, are currently on display in several museums in France.

The decision ends years of debate and is part of a wider discussion in the US and Europe on the restitution of artefacts taken centuries earlier.

The Maoris believed the preservation of the heads kept their spirits alive. But they became exotic collector items in Europe in the 19th Century, with museum officials saying some men may have been killed for their tattoos.

MPs in France almost unanimously backed the bill to return the tattooed heads, some still with bits of hair and teeth attached, back to their home country.

### **'Put to rest'**

It is the first time that French legislation has allowed an entire division of museum artefacts to be returned.

**There are some things that are above art and which should remain sacred**

Catherine Morin-Desailly, French MP

Catherine Morin-Desailly, the MP who proposed the bill, said it showed France's commitment to human rights.

"There are some things which are above art and which should remain sacred," she told Associated Press.

New Zealand first requested their return in the 1980s but the issue became more prominent in France in 2007 after a city council voted for one head to be sent back.

The decision was later overturned by the French Ministry of Culture, which ruled such a decision could not be taken at local level.

Critics had voiced concerns it might set a new precedent, putting other collections at risk.

Pita Sharples, the New Zealand minister for Maori affairs, said the decision was a "matter of great significance".

"Maori believe that, through their ancestors' return to their original homeland, their dignity is restored, and they can be put to rest in a peace among their families," he said.

The heads will be sent to the Te Papa museum in the New Zealand capital, Wellington, and then returned to tribal groups to be buried